UP THE WITCH BROOK ROAD

KATE UPSON CLARK

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Up the WITCH BROOK ROAD

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THIS BOOK
IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
MY MOTHER, PRISCILLA, AND OF HER SISTER DORCAS;
AND TO THEIR STILL LIVING SISTERS,
TIRZAH AND ABIGAIL.

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I

A RUNAWAY

"A brook, like a person, has its fortunes with one: is lucky or unlucky in the precise moment of its falling in our way, and often, by some happy accident, counts with us for something more than its independent value."

Walter Pater, in "Marius the Epicurean."

Up the WITCH BROOK ROAD

CHAPTER I

A Runaway

IT was when I was about seven years old that the horse ran away. As everything in the family, for several years before and after that event, was historically dated accordingly, it made a lasting impression upon my childish mind. This was strengthened by the romantic and exciting complications which followed. It was, as I now see, the most wonderful period of my life —which, indeed, has been rather tame and commonplace during the long years since then. My children and grandchildren complain that I forget the happenings of last year, and even of yesterday; but every trifling incident of that long, strange summer after the horse ran away stands out clearly in my mind.

My young mother, who had been old

"Square" Wells's eldest child, had died in the South when I was a baby. My Southern father had died soon afterward, and I had fallen to the care of my maternal grandparents and their daughters, and especially of my mother's next younger sister, Apphia. Three sons had been born between my mother and my Aunt Apphia, but they had all died in infancy.

My Aunt Apphia, who was my idol then and has been ever since, was at this time about twenty-six years old and very beautiful. Her auburn hair curled closely all over her head, and hung across her fair temples in two long ringlets at each side, according to a fashion of the time—the late forties of the last century. Her eyes were dark hazel in hue, large and very bright, and her complexion was smooth and delicate. She was, like all of my grandfather's family, of only average height, but she was slight, alert and graceful in movement. Her nature was passionately self-sacrificing. She seemed to live entirely for me and for her sisters and parents. She would have made a good heroine in that class of fiction in which the self-effacing damsel lends herself joyously to be the football of destiny; except

that she was endowed with a delicious sense of humor, and a fiery temper, which not even her stern Puritan training and high principle could always control. She and my other aunts were fine scholars, and usually taught a term or more each year in one of the village or near-by district schools.

My Grandfather Wells hated to drive, and there was a well-grounded belief in the family that he could not; though he had to keep a horse, and consequently drove more or less nearly every day. I remember well my own trepidation as I often sat shuddering beside him in the old carriage, while he drove along, jerking the reins gently and clucking without pause, but utterly oblivious of what he was doing. He was wont to pursue a straight course, budging for nobody, and absorbed in his own thoughts. Often he would cease to cluck in order to recite some poem in a low, wavering voice. I should have greatly enjoyed these literary privileges if I had not been so much afraid of running into people. It was currently believed that "Square" Wells had "locked wheels" with nearly every vehicle in town.

When the ladies of the family rode forth in

the afternoons for pleasure, sedately packed into the old-fashioned, covered carry-all, Aunt Apphia always drove—quietly and admirably, as she did everything, especially everything relating to a horse. She was a born horsewoman, and never showed to better advantage than on old Tansy's back. Our horse was named Tansy on account of her tan color, and was esteemed a judicious and sweet-tempered beast. She had become endeared to the family during her fourteen years of service, and the last syllable of her name had been added partly as a mark of this fondness; and also partly because Tansy's character was tinctured with a certain agreeable pungency, like the wayside herb of spicy savor.

On the afternoon of the momentous day of which I have spoken, Josiah Vibber, the hired man, brought around Tansy to the front door, and waited for us to come out. Josiah, by the way, was a descendant of a Revolutionary Hessian, who had settled down in this country after the war, and had married a native farmer's daughter. The "Vibber" was doubtless a corruption of "Weber." Josiah's college-bred posterity call it an "Anglicization."

My grandparents believed in scriptural ap-

pellations—though, to do them justice, Apphia, Jerusha and Leah, as my three aunts were christened, were all family names. Grandmother's name was Apphia, and so had been her mother's before her.

Presently my aunts appeared, in their pretty Thibet gowns and broadcloth capes; for the air was still sharp, though May had come in some days before. Aunt Jerusha, commonly called "Jerry," and Aunt Leah climbed into the back seat. Then Cousin Calista Summers, who lived with us, and Aunt Apphia and I, took our places in front, and off we started.

Tansy was a remarkably large, strong and handsome horse, and Josiah took good care of her. The harness was old, but fine, and the carry-all was rather elegant, so that, though the "Square," who drove his law-business much as he did his horse, was not rich and never would be, his family presented no mean appearance when they were rolling through the village street behind Tansy.

At this time she had been known, in spite of frequent opportunities and even strong provocations, to run away but once. Then my grandfather had been out with her in the "lumber wagon," getting potatoes from a dis-

tant part of his farm, called "the island," because at flood-times an arm of the river encircled it. This arm was the merest rill during most of the year, and, in spite of the fact that it was noted for a certain fertility in snakes, it was a favorite place of amusement for me, when grandfather allowed me occasionally to go with him and Josiah to "farm the island." The snakes there were called by a title which until I was a large girl I supposed to be "chickadaddles."

On the day of that first runaway, Josiah had not gone with grandfather, who had left home shortly after eight in the morning. It was nearly four when the dear old man came up the walk on foot, with his bald head cut and bleeding and a dazed look on his kind face. A trail of potatoes extended for a mile or more up the road, and the lumber wagon reposed in fragments a few rods away. Grandfather never told anybody exactly what had happened; and my aunts, who adored Tansy, and considered their father's driving as bad enough to account for anything, never blamed the good old beast.

It is said that, after a horse has once tasted the delights of running away, he cannot rest

until he tries it again. It is as the first sip of blood to the tamed wolf. But my aunts had never heard of this theory, and they would not have believed such a thing possible of Tansy, in any case. Therefore, we were all very happy on that beautiful May afternoon, as we jogged along the rather sandy road which lay for miles beside the sparkling river. The season had been late and wet, but now the lilacs were budding, and the one wistaria vine in town, which wound in great cables over the low roof of Mr. Duncan Dart's house, was effervescing in mammoth lavender clusters.

Cousin Calista went into raptures over them, as we drove up to Mr. Dart's door. I thought her silly to say so much about them. She was fond of pretending to be very young, and talking in a species of baby dialect which was offensive to me. It was a plague that I could not find out just how old she was. When I asked Aunt Apphia, she said, "Oh, about the age of the rest of us," and that was all I could get out of her. Cousin Calista had yellowish curls, which hung in pairs at each side of her face, just as Aunt Apphia's did, and she was "blonde," Aunt Leah said, while Aunt Apphia was "brown"; but I could see, much as I

hated to admit it, that they looked alike, in spite of an utter unlikeness in their characters. Cousin Calista was always wheedling and affected and plotting, it seemed to me, while Aunt Apphia was as open as the sky at noonday.

It was Saturday, and the object of our drive was to gather flowers for the decoration of the church for the Sunday services. Mrs. Dart promised to bring a branch of wistaria to hang across the front of the pulpit. Then we drove on five or six miles further to a quiet forest road. We reined up beside a low stone wall, and all of the rest alighted to gather flowers, while I was allowed, as a great favor, to remain in the carriage and "hold the horse." These particular woods were very famous for their flowers, and now they were aglow with blossoms, many of which, on account of the long winter, were a heritage to May from April. Bloodroot, liverwort, ladies' slippers, blue, yellow and white violets, trilliums and anemones were everywhere.

For a while I could hear my aunts calling to each other from the different parts of the grove: "Here's the knoll where the trilliums were so thick last year—not one here now,

but plenty over in that swamp there—how queer!" Or, "Here are a million anemones in a new place." Or, "These hollows are simply lined with spring beauties."

After awhile I heard Cousin Calista shout, "We sha'n't have to go up on the rocks for columbine, as we did last year. Here it is by the handful—and no end of crane's bill."

This was the last word that I heard from them, and presently they were all out of sight, and the very sound of their voices became a vague and indistinguishable part of the sweet forest murmur.

I began to feel rather lonely. "Holding the horse" was not the unmixed bliss which my fancy had painted. It seemed as though I had never been in such a desolate spot before, in spite of all the greenness and flowers. I grasped the "lines" more tightly, and was just settling myself more firmly into my seat, with a little sigh, when a great old sheep came rushing, as it were, out of nowhere, and charged madly at Tansy, belching forth a startling "Ba-a-a."

Tansy gave one frightened plunge, making the carry-all shiver and tip in every direction,

and then she ran with all her might—ran in long, jerky gallops, which scared me almost to death.

Down on my knees I plumped, leaning over the dashboard and clinging desperately to the reins. Nature had gifted me with excellent lungs, and, as we sped along, I shrieked and howled at the top of my voice. This did not abate Tansy's panic. Up hill and down she tore with unlessening speed. The road was a lonely one, but we passed an occasional farmhouse, and then I screeched with more fervor than ever. Now and then a man in the fields started in pursuit of us—but Tansy was going like lightning, and left all followers far behind.

My poor frenzied little mind cast wildly about for expedients, but I could think of nothing to do except to hold on to the reins and try to keep from being thrown out. Here and there we passed just above the river on high and rocky ledges, and I uttered shriller wails than ever. Again, we rattled across rude bridges, and a picture would flash before me of myself lying in the water under them, with the swift waves closing over my little face, and my body floating down, down to the

great falls, a dozen or more miles away, and then hurtling and thumping over them.

It was twenty minutes or more of perfect agony—and all the while I was in mortal terror, above everything else, of meeting a team—a fear which the complaints of the family had rendered chronic with me when I rode with grandfather, and which was now only more acute.

Suddenly I heard a loud yelling in front of me, where a brook crossed my road, and a branch road, which followed it, came in. Two young men were rushing down that branch road toward me. Their arms were wide outstretched, and they seemed to me the most beautiful beings that I had ever beheld. By this time my poor parched throat could scarcely give forth a sound, but I made a last supreme effort, and they seemed to respond pityingly to my appeal. I imagined that they were saying, "We will save you or die." The last thing that I remember was a vision of those two heaven-sent figures running toward me, one on either side of the narrow road, and each with an outstretched arm. Then there was a back-breaking jerk. I felt myself flying through the air—and I knew nothing more.

When I came to myself, I was in the arms of one of the young men, who was soothing me like a mother. We were sitting beside the little brook, into which, from time to time, he dipped his hand and then sprinkled my face. Not far away sat his friend, and, to my utter amazement, in his arms lay my Aunt Apphia, her pretty Thibet gown soiled and torn, her small hands scratched and bleeding, and her face like marble.

As I looked about in a dazed way, I took in nothing definite except that face and figure. Then I fell back, moaning, "Oh, my auntie is dead! Oh, auntie, auntie!" and went off again into unconsciousness. When I awoke a second time, I was lying on the stones, and my friend was dashing water frantically over my head, until my long yellow curls were drenched. I sat up slowly. Then I heard Aunt Apphia groaning. This meant that she was at least alive, and I took heart. She still lay across the arms of the other young man, and her face was still deathly white, but she moved her hands even while I was looking at her, and her groans continued.

The young men talked softly together. I thought their voices the most musical that I

had ever heard. When at last I sat up, my especial protector left me and went over to help his friend, who called out to me, "Sit still, little girl. You're all right, I reckon."

I had never heard any one say, "I reckon", since my father had died in my babyhood. One of my few distinct recollections of his speech had been of that "I reckon", and my heart warmed more than ever toward the young man who had rescued me. Incidentally, I may remark that very early in my life I remember thinking it strange that the unreckoning Southerner should habitually "reckon", while his thrifty and careful Northern brother should prefer to "guess."

Both of the young men now hung over Aunt Apphia, and I saw that one of them had a pocket-cup into which, from time to time, he poured a few drops from a flask, and then gave her a draught.

"She is coming to, Dick," said, at last, the one who was holding her. He spoke very gravely. "I hate to lay her down on those rough stones. Here—spread out my coat for her head. There—that grassy place isn't so bad. It might shock her into fainting again if she woke up and found me holding her."

"She makes me think of a white rose," said the other one softly, as they made the transfer. He called his friend "George." Cousin Calista's father had been Aunt Apphia's "Uncle George," and the name made me feel as though these young men might properly be recognized as family friends.

"George," he said, "my arms ache like the deuce. Did you ever feel anything pull like that confounded brute?"

This sort of language was new to me, but it did not offend me.

"I've got a strain in my back which will make practical mining impossible for some days to come," answered "George," still gravely.

At that instant Aunt Apphia's moans became louder, and she sprang to her feet with a startled cry.

"Barbara!" she murmured, in an agonized tone. "Where is Barbara?"

II

A HEROINE

"— thou shalt find she will outstrip all praise
And make it halt behind her."

Prospero, in the "Tempest."

CHAPTER II

A Heroine

"HERE I am, auntie!" I wailed, sobbing piteously in my weakness and bewilderment. I tried to crawl toward her, but I could not, because my knees were lame and I felt sore and shaken all over. The mere sound of my voice, however, seemed to reassure her. She opened her beautiful hazel eyes, and light and color overspread her face. Then she sat down slowly, while the young men fell back to a respectful distance, removing their hats, with a scrupulous regard to etiquette which was foreign to the customs of our little village. They were dressed in a rough but picturesque costume, and seemed to me to belong to a species of demi-gods; and though I afterward came to know them well and they made a great pet of me, I never quite recovered from the slight awe of them which began beside the brook that day.

Aunt Apphia put her hand to her forehead

and looked around her in a dazed way. The young man named "George" bent over her deferentially, and said in a gentle voice, while the color mounted up into his face, "You are all right. Don't be worried about the child. All that either of you needed was a little care, and, as luck would have it, we were on hand to give it. My name is George Holly, and this is my friend, Richard Perrine."

"My name is Apphia Wells," murmured Aunt Apphia faintly, "and this is my little niece, Barbara. Are you sure—oh, are you sure——"

She looked toward me, and the red began again to fade out from her face.

"I can't stand up very well, auntie," I piped up, cheerfully, "or I would come over there."

She staggered to her feet and tried to walk toward me, but she had taken scarcely two steps when she swayed to one side, fainting again. Both of the young men sprang to save her, but it was again into the arms of Mr. George Holly that she fell. I had already decided that, though both of them were good-looking, he was the handsomer, as he was the larger, of the two, and I liked him better than "Dick."

"Water! Water!" cried George Holly, impatiently.

His friend brought a cupful, and presently Aunt Apphia revived again. This time she was quite herself for several minutes, bending over me and caressing me and going into a delirium of joy over me. Then she turned toward the young men, to whom she had as yet paid little heed, and her voice choked as she said brokenly, "I can't thank you enough —ever. You have saved her life—the dearest thing on earth to me. She has been mine for six years—ever since her mother died—and you can imagine how I love her. It would kill me to lose her. You must let us do something for you. Oh, my father will——"

Here her emotion became too much for her once more, and, even while she was holding out her hand to Mr. George Holly, she swayed again, and again he caught her and saved her from a bad fall on the brookside stones.

This little drama of alternate swooning and recovery might have gone on indefinitely—for, as I remembered it afterward, I could see that it was most agreeable to Mr. George Holly—but for the fact that, just as Aunt Apphia straightened up for the third time, the rattle

of a cart was heard, and presently a farmer whom we had always known, and who lived in a house near the woods in which we had been picking flowers, drove up noisily. He brought with him, huddled tearfully together on the rude cross-boards of his farm-wagon, Aunt Jerry, Aunt Leah and Cousin Calista, all of them agitated nearly to the point of hysterics.

There was a perfect Babel of exclamations, explanations and introductions, and the tears of the young ladies were dried when they saw that both Aunt Apphia and I, though scratched and bruised and besmirched, were safe and in good hands. Perhaps a better way of describing their condition would be to say that their agitation was not allayed, but only changed to a more agreeable kind. Cousin Calista was especially exhilarated at the sight of these handsome and well-behaved youths. She began at once to "make eyes" at them and to talk in what I have since heard called "the artless prattle style" of conversation, which she was apt to affect in company.

"It was perfectly wonderful to see you ride off bareback on that dreadful horse, Affie!" she cried, glowingly.

"You would have wondered more if you could have seen me fall off three or four times," laughed Aunt Apphia, who, except for a pronounced nervousness, seemed quite like herself by this time.

"Where did you get it? I don't understand," gasped Aunt Leah.

"Why, I told you," answered Cousin Calista, rather sharply, and seizing the narrative for herself. "Just as soon as we heard that wild rattle of the carry-all and then Barbara screaming, Affie flew through the woods and down the road. You were rods away, but I was pretty near, and I dragged along after her, getting further and further behind every instant. I was running as fast as I could, too. Then I saw Affie climb over the wall and rush into Mr. Beals's pasture, and begin to call most winsomely to old Jack. Why under the sun did you choose old Jack, Affie?"

"I knew Jack wasn't the most amiable beast in the world," admitted Aunt Apphia, smilingly turning to Mr. Beals, who gave his head an expressive wrench. The vagaries of "Beals's old Jack" were familiar to every man for miles around. He was the nearest to the modern "bucking broncho" then known in

that neighborhood; but he could drag more hay and heavier stone-boats, and could travel faster, than any other horse in town.

"But I knew, too," continued Aunt Apphia, "that he was strong and could go—and, besides, he was close by, while the others were ever so far away. I knew he would throw me off, and he did. But every time he threw me off, he would run a little way and then stand still and let me get on again. Then I would hold on to his mane as hard as I could, and lie perfectly flat on his back, like a circus performer—and chirrup to him, and strike him with my hand—and he went like the wind. I don't mind his throwing me off—oh, he is the only horse on earth which could have come anywhere near that wicked Tansy!"

Aunt Apphia's voice broke, and she began to sob.

"It was a brilliant feat of horsemanship," burst in Mr. George Holly, with an eagerness which testified not only to his fervent admiration of Aunt Apphia, but to his essentially masculine dislike to see a woman cry. "You are a heroine, Miss Wells."

The young men around Birchmont village did not speak in this way, but we had many

city relatives who visited us from time to time, and my aunts and Cousin Calista had attended city boarding schools, so that we all, with a pleasant thrill, detected at once the fact that, somehow or other, two men possessed of urban culture had stumbled into these wilds.

Mr. Holly's tone and compliment restored Aunt Apphia's self-control, and she retorted, with a half-indignant catch in her voice, "Indeed, I am no heroine at all, I am simply a young woman who has been used, from her cradle, to horseback riding. I can ride on any sort of a saddle, and almost as well without any. There seemed to be no other horse available, so I took Jack. Why, Mr. Beals, where *is* Jack?"

Sure enough, there was no Jack in sight. We all began to look around in an anxious way, especially the two young men, who started up guiltily, but Mr. Beals reassured us by bursting forth disgustedly, "'Where's Jack?' I don't know nor care. Gol darn his old hide, I say—an' I don't care who hears me. Why, when I think, Miss Affie—" his rough old voice shook, and the tears started to the eyes of us all, in spite of the way in which we had laughed at him, to begin with—

" when I think how that dum old brute sarved ye—why, Miss Affie, I could kill him. I'm afeard I would kill him if I had him here now —I am, sure as ye live. It's a wonder you ain't killed. How did you ever durst to git onto him so many times? The Square had orter be proud on ye—I swan he had!"

" Oh, don't, Mr. Beals!" cried Aunt Apphia, looking very lovely, as she sat blushing on a big stone, with her tangled curls shining around her face. " You mustn't talk so—and, above all, when Jack comes back to you, as he probably will, don't you hurt him. I fairly love him for getting me here so quickly. Why, Mr. Holly tells me that I was not more than ten or twelve minutes behind Tansy—and just think how she was going! But we ought not to stay here any longer. Such accidents are always heard of—and probably dreadful things will be said all over the village, and father and mother will be alarmed."

She sprang up, forgetting her disabilities. Then she found that she could scarcely step, and Aunt Leah and Cousin Calista flew to her side to help her, before either of the young men could get there. Richard Perrine lifted

me in his arms, while Aunt Jerry held my hand. Mr. Beals turned his springless old cart around, and, one by one, we were bestowed on the rough seats which had been improvised in it. Aunt Leah and Cousin Calista could not, of course, lift Aunt Apphia into this uncouth vehicle, but the useful Mr. Holly was close beside them. Aunt Apphia's face flushed scarlet, as, apologizing for having to clasp her so tightly, he hoisted her up quite over the side plank and into Mr. Beals's brawny arms. Both of the young men were tall and well set up, and the effort of carrying any one of us would not have been too much for either one of them. Aunt Apphia's weight, which, indeed, was little more than a hundred pounds, seemed nothing at all to George Holly, in spite of the strain which he must have suffered in stopping our runaway horse. Tansy, by the way, had been tied in the bushes beside the brook, and was now ready to be led home behind our equipage, Aunt Jerry holding the halter. The carry-all was considerably broken up. The young men dragged it into a patch of woods not far away, and the next day my grandfather went, with a blacksmith, to get it.

It was repaired, and seemed then as good as ever. I rode in it almost daily until I was a woman grown.

Aunt Apphia and I were deposited in the middle of the wagon, as that was considered the most comfortable portion. Aunt Apphia sat on a crossboard, propped against the knees of Aunt Leah, who, with Aunt Jerry, occupied the back seat. Cousin Calista sat beside Mr. Beals in front. I lay in the bottom of the wagon, with my head in Aunt Apphia's lap, and a coat of Mr. Holly's wrapped around my shoulders.

When at last we were ready to start for home, we bade our young benefactors farewell, with much regret. We had a drive of fourteen miles before us, and the roads were rough, but the young men assured us that they rode on horseback a great deal, and would not in the least mind the trifling expedition to the village. They would certainly do themselves the honor to ride down and inquire for us within a few days—as soon as they felt that such invalids had had time to regain their strength.

Suddenly Cousin Calista cried out, just as we were about to drive away, " Why, girls, this is Witch Brook. Don't you remember when

Uncle Wells brought us up here, a year or two ago? He has told us many times about the witch's house, a mile or more up the stream from here, and we have always been planning to have a picnic there."

"Oh, yes, this is the Witch Brook road," corroborated Richard Perrine. "We live about two miles up yonder. We pass near the old house every time we come down."

"Oh, do you?" breathed Cousin Calista, shudderingly. "How fascinating! And will you take us up there some time?"

"Oh, certainly!" replied the young man with enthusiasm.

"My father is going to take us up," broke in Aunt Jerry, flushing rather proudly, and looking with a slight air of reproof toward Cousin Calista.

"Oh, well—anyhow!" laughed that irrepressible maiden. "I don't care, so long as we get there. Things seem to happen on this Witch Brook road, don't they?"—looking archly into the eyes of the waiting youths. "There was the old witch, with all her black cats and cauldrons and rabbits that Uncle Wells has told us about—and now our runaway."

"But still the witches," laughed Richard

Perrine back to her; "only witches of a much sweeter and better kind."

We rode away amid a gale of laughter, and, in spite of our bruises, Aunt Apphia and I bumped over those fourteen terrible miles without very great discomfort. By the time that we were fairly out of sight of our new friends, Cousin Calista and my two younger aunts had assaulted Mr. Beals with a storm of questions concerning them. None of us were familiar with this far-off neighborhood, but he lived fully six miles nearer to it, and we felt as though he ought to know something of these attractive and unusual young men. A brighter person might have observed more, but Jonas Beals seemed neither to have seen nor heard anything of them.

"Oh, dear! If we only knew who they are and what they are doing off on the hills up that god-forsaken Witch Brook road!" sighed Cousin Calista.

"Oh, you will know before long," Aunt Jerry told her, with an air of impatience at her curiosity, though Aunt Jerry, privately, was just as curious. She was the only member of the family who dared to snub Cousin Calista, and she seldom lost an opportunity to do it.

"I'd like to know how?" demanded Cousin Calista tartly.

"Probably plenty of people in the village know, even if we do not happen to," rejoined Aunt Jerry coolly. "Anyway, they said they were coming to call."

"Maybe they will, and maybe they won't," sighed Cousin Calista; but in my soul I knew very well that they would.

My Aunt Jerry was generally considered quite as beautiful as Aunt Apphia. Indeed, I had all my life heard Aunt Jerry called the handsomest girl in town, though if strict beauty were in question, it might have been hard to settle the matter between them. To my mind, though Aunt Jerry might be more brilliant, Aunt Apphia was far and away the lovelier—and yet I admired my Aunt Jerry with all my heart. Her hair was blue-black and very glossy. A gentleman, so a family tradition ran, had once said to her that he should think she would never need a candle in the dark if she would only let loose her shining locks. I had often admired Aunt Jerry's thatch of shimmering hair, as it fell around her, quite to her knees, and I fully concurred with her admirer. I insisted upon

her trying the experiment one dark night to find out if she really could see by the light of her hair; but I never knew whether she could or not, for the weather was cold and clear, and as Aunt Jerry was brushing her hair vigorously at the time, it threw off scores of electric sparks, which snapped and crackled, and frightened me almost to death.

Aunt Jerry had large, expressive brown eyes, just like grandfather's, and her complexion was fairer than Aunt Apphia's. She had a smaller nose, too—for Aunt Apphia's rather remarkable executive ability was indicated by a straight and commanding nose—which she considered a disfigurement, though it was really very becoming.

Aunt Jerry was the gayest and wittiest member of the family, but she was also the one most quickly affected to tears, and during our adventure by the brookside she had been the quietest one of the party, wiping her beautiful eyes and blowing her pretty little nose almost constantly, while Aunt Leah, who had more curiosity, and Cousin Calista, who loved an adventure, especially if there were young men in it, had done most of the talking.

"I hope they will come to-morrow—or the

next day," sighed Cousin Calista again, after a moment of meditation, presumably upon the graces of our new friends.

"Well, they won't," declared Aunt Jerry with conviction. "They are too polite. They had on working clothes, but I never saw more perfect manners in my life."

Aunt Jerry was rather conventional in her ideas of propriety. She read Morris & Willis's "Home Journal" every week of her life, and was considered in the family an authority upon social matters.

"Yes, aren't they polite!" chimed in Aunt Leah. "I never saw anything like it—certainly not in Birchmont."

Cousin Calista gave a light but not ill-natured laugh. She was never ill-natured with Aunt Leah. "I'll tell Elihu Trimble about that," she said.

Elihu Trimble was at this time a senior in Williams College and Aunt Leah's devoted knight. It was taken for granted in the family that, just as soon as he was through with his education and could get established in life, they would be married. Grandfather was expecting, I knew, to take charge of Elihu's law studies, and to admit him into partnership in

his law business; and as Elihu was a promising, and especially a thrifty youth, we all had great hopes of the result. I heard grandmother say one day: "Elihu will collect all those bills that have been running so long. Your father would never ask a man for a cent, no matter how much that man owed him, if it should happen to be reported that he was hard up; but Elihu, I hope, will have more sense of what is due to his own family."

"Indeed, he will," Aunt Leah had said. "Elihu will do his duty to father and me before he takes care of the rest of the world. Father does just the other way."

Both Aunt Leah and Elihu were very near-sighted. In those days people did not wear eyeglasses so universally as they do now; and among my earliest recollections are those of seeing Aunt Leah and her beloved Elihu bending together over some book which they were reading, with their heads almost knocking together. His hair was rough and dark, and hers was smooth and pale brown, and the sight was funny.

Now there was a spice of honest wrath in Aunt Leah's tone as she responded to Cousin Calista's raillery: "Elihu Trimble is all

right; but you know as well as I do that he is a country boy, and he is shy. I don't doubt that he is worth a dozen of these palavering city fellows, but, all the same, they make a good appearance."

"Don't you imagine for a moment," interposed Aunt Apphia, with some feeling, "that one can't have a good appearance and real worth, too. I believe that these young men are as good inside as they are outside. Certainly they were models in their treatment of Barbara and me. I never saw anything more tender than the way in which Mr. Perrine lifted Barbara into the wagon when we came away."

"Perhaps you might if you could have seen Mr. Holly lift you up," laughed Cousin Calista, a trifle disagreeably. Aunt Jerry's proud black head tossed, but Aunt Apphia hastened to say, pretending not to understand: "Oh, I don't mean that one of them isn't just as gentlemanly as the other. There is no use in passing judgment on them, anyway, until we know them better."

Suddenly Mr. Beals broke into the conversation.

"I've ben a-thinkin'," he remarked succinctly, "ever sence we begun talkin' 'em over

—an' it's sorter come to me that last year I heard sunthin' or yuther about Jed Sears findin' gold on his place up Witch Brook road there—and then, awhile afterwards, there was talk about some Boston fellers buyin' a part of his pasture an' comin' up to open a mine there—or sunthin'. Mebbe these is them."

"Gold!" sniffed Aunt Jerry. "Why, old Jed Sears is a sort of simpleton, isn't he?"

"He ain't real sensible," admitted Jonas Beals cautiously. "But then he ain't what you'd call right down silly. Folks didn't reely think he knew what he was talkin' about when he said he'd found gold on his place—for lots of us say things—an' think things. Lord! I sh'd say we do. But mebbe he has found gold, an' these fellers is a-minin' of it. I don't know."

"I think it is very likely that he has, and these young men look to me as though they knew what they were about. They have probably bought Jed Sears's farm, and opened a mine there, and I shouldn't be surprised if they should grow very rich," commented Aunt Leah, who was of a romantic and visionary turn of mind. This peculiarity was ascribed by the rest of the family to the fact that she

had always had a lover. I remember hearing grandfather say with some distrust, "Elihu isn't so much out of the way—but I hate this everlasting courting for a girl. It has gone on now, year in and year out, ever since he and Leah were children, and I believe it makes Leah sentimental."

When my Aunt Leah uttered these dreamy, prophetic words regarding the brilliant prospects of the supposed young miners, Cousin Calista laughed again. "If that isn't just like you, Leah, dear!" she said, and Aunt Jerry chimed in with, "Now, don't go and make Elihu jealous. He will feel as though he would have to cast about and open a gold mine, too."

"Nonsense!" cried Cousin Calista. "Stop teasing the child, Jerry."

"I don't care half so much about gold and gold mines as you do, Jerusha Wells," retorted Aunt Leah, resentfully.

While these lively discussions were in progress, I lay peacefully on a horse-blanket on the wagon floor, pressed close against Aunt Aphia, and holding her hand tight in mine. I appreciated fully that wild ride of hers on the bare back of vicious old Jack, and all of those

jarring, dangerous falls. I understood that she had risked her life for me, and my heart overflowed with love and adoration for her. Then everything had come out so well, on the whole, that I shared in the general exhilaration at finding these interesting, mysterious new friends. Even my soreness and aching bones did not hurt me so much because of this pleasant excitement. I stroked the soft, fine cloth of Mr. Holly's coat and experienced in so doing a delightful sense of nearness to that elegant youth.

It was now well along into the twilight, and we began to feel tired and hungry. Cousin Calista yawned openly, and we were all yielding to a natural sleepiness, when Aunt Leah, who had the very worst eyesight of us all, cried shrilly, "There is Elihu! And, oh, mercy! How he is riding!"

Elihu had been at home from college for several days now, helping his father on the farm, but he was anxious to get back to Williamstown, and we knew that he would begrudge anything which took him away from his work.

"Oh, I wonder what they have heard!" gasped Aunt Jerry. "Isn't it lucky the news

reached them so late! Probably it was almost dark before they heard anything."

Elihu was by this time close upon us. His hat was on the back of his head. His smooth-shaven, dark face was colorless, and well thrust forward, and he was squinting his eyes in the effort to see.

III

A LOVER

"One must have the wit
From such a sharp and waspish word as 'no,'
To pluck the sting."

CHAPTER III

A Lover

"YOU are all here! Thank the Lord!" he cried, as he pulled off his hat and leaned over into the wagon in order to get a better view of us. "And as sure as I live, there's Tansy. Why, it's all over town that Barbara is nearly killed—hadn't a whole bone in her body, I heard—and that Affie is all broken up, too. The men at the store had it that Tansy had just stood and trampled on her—and there was something about Mr. Beals's old Jack—and they say that all of you are more or less hurt. For heaven's sake, how bad is it?"

His black eyes rested on Aunt Leah, with an expression of anguished solicitude, during the whole of this explosive speech. Even phlegmatic old Jonas Beals chuckled to see it.

"Lord! th'ain't nothin' the matter with *her*," he drawled emphatically. "She ain't the primy donny of this comp'ny. Miss Affie yander—she done the hoop-jumpin' an' the reg'lar circus business to-day. Lord! I guess she

did. I can see her in my mind now, climbin' up on old Jack, an' then gittin' throwed off 's fast 's she clum up. Darn him! I've seen him. Lord! I guess I have. I do' know how in thunder she stood it, little trembly thing like her; beats all what a sight o' spunk there is in some o' them little critters!"

He had turned, and was regarding Aunt Aphia with his seamed and rugged features shaking in a perfect whirlwind of affectionate admiration. I snuggled up to her more closely than ever, and passed my arms quite around her soft waist.

"So that's it, is it?" said Elihu, impatient to hear more of the facts in the case. "Well, you seem to have come out of it pretty fairly, Affie. And how are you, Barbara?"

We assured him that we were likely to be all right in a day or two. He saw that, though he was in a fever to learn all about everything, and we were equally in a fever to tell him, there was no use in trying to talk just then, for we were still two or three miles from home, and it was growing late. He finally contented himself with riding along beside us, and getting fragmentary replies to the questions which, from time to time, he shouted out to us.

Soon we began to meet other neighbors and friends. Several of these turned and rode along behind us, having come forth on purpose, as they said, to see if they could be of any service in the dire calamity which was reported to have overtaken us—and which really had—only we were now in such high spirits that it was hard to make any one believe the horrors through which we had actually passed. It seemed to me as though they were all more curious than benevolent; but I am told that motives are so mixed in most of us that it is hard to decide why we really do anything.

Grandfather Wells had been for many years a deacon in the church, and, like most devout families in those days, we held family worship both morning and evening. When he offered prayer at such times, he stood with his hands on the back of a chair, tipped up, wrong side before, in front of him. He seldom omitted a petition that we might come into the divine presence with our hands on our mouths and our mouths in the dust. On the night after the runaway he uttered this dismal extreme of humility with more unction than ever, repeating over and over also that, as the bulrushes by the river's brink, so were we tossed by wind

and wave, and unless an Almighty arm should be stretched to save us, we should all miserably perish. Then I thought of the handsome young men whose outstretched arms had stopped Tansy in her wild flight, as I had already related to several spell-bound groups since our return. It was not strange that images mingled in my mind, and that in my dreams that night I beheld the two young men who had saved my life, bewilderingly apotheosized and wearing golden crowns, which seemed to me to be made from their own limitless gold mines.

The doctor had come before we had finished our supper. He had examined both Aunt Apphia and me minutely, and had decided that, though we were much shaken and nervously shocked, we had no broken bones, and probably no internal injuries, and were likely to be well within a few days. Then he bound us up in soft bandages and sweet-smelling unguents, and we were given great bowls of catnip tea, and put to bed. The next morning we were decidedly better.

On the evening of the fourth day after the runaway, Silas Doty came to see Aunt Apphia. It was apparently an unimportant visit, but it

assumed later an aspect of vital significance.

Silas Doty was the son of a farmer who lived two or three miles outside of the village. He was young, but enormously tall and large. I can remember him as far back as I can remember anything, because he was always coming to our house to borrow books from grandfather's library, which was by far the largest one in town. He would take even very thick volumes and then bring them back in an incredibly short time, with the report that he had read every word in them. Grandfather and Aunt Apphia sometimes undertook to "examine" Silas after these literary feats, and in justice to him it must be said that they never caught him in any deceit in the matter.

He was called close-mouthed and secretive, and I never heard him talk with any one except in monosyllables, unless he was alone with Aunt Apphia. Then his rather sullen and ugly countenance took on an almost pleasing expression, and he showed that he could talk fluently, though his extensive reading had little effect upon his native dialect. Aunt Apphia was as inveterate a reader as he was.

Often I have heard grandfather tell some visitor privately, "My daughter Apphia has read, I believe, every book in my library, except the law books—and, on my soul, I wouldn't wonder if the jade had read half of those—a remarkable mind, sir—if she is my daughter. It is a compensation, perhaps, for the loss of my sons."

Poor grandfather could never become quite reconciled to the death of those three fine boys.

I remember that it was a chilly evening. Grandfather was sitting in his study, which we called the "east room," and Aunt Apphia and I were in the parlor across the hall—the "west room." Fires were blazing in the old-fashioned fireplaces in both apartments. Grandmother, as usually in the evening, sat knitting close beside grandfather, who was reading aloud to her.

Aunt Apphia was lounging in a low rocking-chair near the fire, while I lay on the horsehair sofa, well blanketed and pillowed, beside her. She had been reading aloud to me, but she had accused me of growing sleepy, and had stopped; while I was indeed dozing on my comfortable couch. The rest of the family had gone to a party, and Aunt Apphia would

have accompanied them but for the fact that she was not yet recovered from her lameness and bruises.

Silas had shut the door rather hard when he came in, and that had partially awakened me. Then he had begun to talk in his usual voice and without excitement, and I had drowsed off again slowly. He had been reading a novel by one of the Brontë sisters (as Aunt Apphia has since told me.) Their remarkable productions were then fresh, and both Aunt Apphia and Silas were greatly interested in them. For awhile they said nothing which especially attracted my attention. Then I heard Silas remark, in a tone of so much feeling that it roused me, "You see, Miss Affie, his love-affairs didn't go right. They say that spoils a man for always."

"Nonsense!" Aunt Apphia commented laughingly. "A man is foolish to mind anything like that so much. He ought to have more strength of character."

"I know it will spoil my life," went on Silas intensely, "if somebody that I love doesn't love me."

"Why, Silas," said Aunt Apphia innocently, but somewhat startled by his impetu-

osity, "I didn't know that you were in love with anybody. I thought you were rather noted for not going with the girls. I never even saw you taking anybody out to eat sugar at the sugar-parties this spring."

"No," growled Silas, still intense, "you didn't."

"Well," laughed Aunt Apphia, "you are not like other boys, Silas, so I suppose you will take your love-affairs in your own way, and not like other people. But let me give you some good advice. I have often heard my mother say jokingly—you know my mother is a very wise woman, Silas—that it is a good plan in such matters to pick out somebody that you can love, but that it is foolish to really fall in love with her—or him—until you are sure of her—or him! Better wait until you are fairly married, she says, to fall deeply in love. If that were always done, there wouldn't be any of these terrible cases of 'disappointment' that we are always hearing about. Don't you think that is good advice?"

Aunt Apphia looked roguishly at Silas, evidently trying to conceal the fact, which seemed patent to me, that she was rather bored at the

thought of having to listen to a statement of his love-troubles.

"But what if you couldn't help it?" argued Silas, with a thickening voice. "What if it took you like a great wind that blows you right off your feet? Or like a great rock that comes tumbling down on your head—and you can't help it?"

"Silas, Silas!" scoffed Aunt Apphia. "You have been reading too many novels. Now here is the 'History of the Westminster Assembly.' Let me recommend that you peruse that in order to get your mind off from these inflammatory themes. Why, you aren't more than eighteen, are you?"

"I was nineteen last January," announced Silas proudly, but sulkily; "and my father says there isn't a man in town can cut a swath closer or plough a furrow straighter than I can. He's givin' me my time, and I'm goin' to work Theron Bixby's farm on shares this summer. I've begun already."

"Why, Silas!" said Aunt Apphia, in a tone of interested condescension, which impressed with its quality even me, as I lay counterfeiting sleep on the sofa, and which must have driven Silas almost crazy; "you are really

getting to be a man—and I hadn't realized it in the least. I congratulate you—very warmly. And don't worry about your love-affairs. Any girl in town will be glad to have you wait on her. Of course she will. You can refer her to me." Aunt Apphia laughed lightly. "I think I know you pretty well, Silas, and I can certainly tell her all about the books that you have read. Just think how many long talks we have had! Why, there is scarcely a subject among all those which are treated in my father's library that we haven't talked to tatters, as people say."

There was a moment's silence—and then Silas burst forth, in a muffled voice, but with more passion in it than I have ever heard in the voice of any other human being, into an extraordinary appeal. I have never read or heard since a declaration of love without thinking of Silas's—and yet I know of none that compares with it in vigor and persuasiveness, though I cannot give an adequate description of it.

"Know me, Miss Affie! You don't know me any more'n as if you was a baby. Why—it's you! Don't you see—it's you! I've been lovin' you all these years—and you don't

know how I felt when that Lyman Baker was around you so—and when he died, I used to go out in the woods and just holler and say, 'Thank the Lord! Thank the Lord!' over an' over an' over—and lately I've loved you so—it seemed to sorter hurt—in here—an' I couldn't wait to get back to you—that's why I hurried and read the books through so quick. Why, I sat up nights when they thought I was abed, an' then all day I couldn't wait to get here, but I worked hard on the farm, because I knew you would like that, and I'd got to get a farm of my own. But when I got here I didn't dare to say anything, and then the horse ran away, and now I can't bear to see you so sick and lame—an' I know you think I ain't anything but a baby—but I am—and I want you—and there ain't much difference in our ages. Mother says I am old for my age—and you seem to me ever so much younger than Miss Leah. You always did—and you seem younger than me—and it'll kill me, Miss Affie—it will—if you can't—"

The boy broke down and blubbered outright, hiding his face in his big red hands. I was frightened almost out of my senses by this tempestuous outbreak, but I only peeped

through my eyelashes and lay perfectly rigid. Aunt Apphia had thrown herself back in her chair, limp and helpless. She was almost dumbfounded.

"Why, Silas, Silas!" she began at last in a distressed voice.

"Oh, don't say anything!" he began again, mopping his face with a great green cotton handkerchief—a stark, stained face, in which his black eyes burned like coals of black fire. "I can see now that it sounds to you as if I was out of my head. It didn't seem so when I was thinking about it at home. I've been over and over with it in my mind—what I would say, and then what you would say—and it seemed as if you might—it did seem so—when I had the Bixby farm to work on shares—and all—don't!—don't!"—as she began to speak again. "I can see that you don't think about it as I do—but I want to have you hear what I'm going to say—and maybe sometime—don't you think that sometime—"

"Oh, no, Silas!" cried Aunt Apphia, with a certain sharp gentleness which made him start. "Never, never!"

"Oh, yes, sometime—maybe sometime," pleaded Silas, in a tone which might have

softened the rocks in the river,—"but, anyhow—I'm going to love you, Miss Affie—I'm going to love you always—for I never can stop—and maybe you will think different after awhile—they do sometimes—you know—and I shall always be the same. I know there's been ever so many after you—but I never was afraid of any of 'em, except Lyman Baker—and when I found you wasn't a-goin' to have him—and he went off and died—why, then I thought maybe—oh, don't say anything—don't—I couldn't bear it, Miss Affie—but I shall always keep on lovin' you—oh, better than anybody ever loved anybody else—and I shall always be doin' things for you—and you must let me—and then in a year or two—or ten years or so—"

He choked up entirely—bounced out of his chair with such force that it fell backward with a bang—tossed his great arms up to the ceiling in a gesture of supreme despair, and then stooped over Aunt Apphia, seized her madly in a last stifling embrace, stammered out between convulsive sobs, "Oh, I do love you so!"—then laid her back softly in her chair, and rushed out into the night. He caught up his hat as he went, but he forgot

to get a new book, and even forgot to leave the one which he had brought back with him. There was but a single thought in his soul.

I lay there, stiff and frightened and uncomfortable, for what seemed to me a half-hour or more, though it was probably but a few moments, after he had left. I would not for worlds have had anybody know that I had heard Silas's interview—most of all, Aunt Apphia. She sat still in her chair, wringing her hands from time to time and crying softly, "Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" I wondered if I should ever be in such distress to hear a young man speak such adoring words. It seemed to me that I should rather like it—not taking in the full extent of poor Silas's suffering. Then I thought of the elegant Mr. George Holly, and contrasted him with shambling, awkward Silas. I wondered if Aunt Apphia would act so miserable if Mr. Holly should talk so to her.

Presently, to my unspeakable relief, grandfather came in.

"What was the matter with Silas?" he demanded abruptly. "Was that he who slammed the door so just now?"

"Ye—es," stammered Aunt Apphia guiltily.

"What was the trouble?" asked grandfather, instinctively taking her hand and feeling of her pulse.

"He has been getting excited over the books he has been reading," faltered Aunt Apphia.

"H'm—he has, has he? Well, he can stop slamming our doors so—or else there will be something to pay. He nearly gave your mother a fit—and I should say that he had nearly given you one, too. Why, Affie, you are shaking all over. I'm afraid you got hurt worse than Dr. Bates thought. Here, you take Barbara and go to bed. Shannah will come in and cover the fire."

So we limped off to bed, but I could not go to sleep again, for Aunt Apphia tossed and moaned far into the night. Indeed, I was so much stirred that I could not have slept, even if she had lain perfectly still. I heard my grandfather go about the house, locking the doors. Later, my other aunts and Cousin Calista came in rather noisily. They went out into the dining-room, and a faint rattling of dishes followed. I knew that they were serving their escorts with cake and cider, and I tried to make out from the sound of their voices who those young men might be.

Elihu was there, as I could hear, but I went to sleep without deciding who the others were, and the exciting events of the next day drove them quite out of my mind.

IV

A VISIT

"Those are happiest family circles which are bound together by intangible spiritual ties in the midst of care, poverty and hard work."

Lucy Larcom.

CHAPTER IV

A Visit

THAT next day was the fifth after our accident. It was warm and summer-like, as the middle of May should be, and we all welcomed the fine weather, after the chills and damps of the earlier part of the month. For the last three days my aunts and Cousin Calista had been watching eagerly for the promised visit from Mr. Holly and Mr. Perrine. Regularly they had put on their prettiest gowns and their wide embroidered collars, right after dinner, and had looked toward the west, out of which these young Lochinvars might be expected to come, at least once in every fifteen minutes, until the hour grew so late that hope had to be given up for that day. Aunt Jerry and Aunt Leah had puffed their soft, fine, but very straight hair more smoothly than ever over their ears, while Aunt Apphia and Cousin Calista had paid unusual attention to their ringlets.

In the afternoons we almost always sat in

the same seats, respectively, and did the same things. The big, square, east room, grandfather's study, was our sitting-room then, for he seldom sat at his desk except in the mornings and evenings. His large writing-table, covered with a crimson cloth, stood between the two front windows, which looked toward the beautiful north woods on the pasture hill, a quarter of a mile or more across the road and the little brook beyond. This brook curved near by, and there was a bridge over it, a few rods to the westward of us.

Aunt Jerry always sat at the west end of the table and Cousin Calista at the east end, while Aunt Apphia's seat was at a third window on the east side of the room, and grandmother and Aunt Leah were in front of the table. I was always perched in my own small chair, as close to Aunt Apphia as I could possibly get.

On this especial afternoon Aunt Jerry and Cousin Calista were both of them sewing, with their work in the mouths of two silver sewing-birds, which were screwed (prudently, over paper) fast to the table. Cousin Calista was hemming a ruffle for her new dimity gown. This gown was going to be very elaborate, and

Cousin Calista scarcely spoke during the afternoons nowadays, she was so much absorbed in it. I laughed in my soul a scornful laugh to see her. She felt, it seemed to me, that with her fine clothes, which were rather costly and much be-furbelowed (they were mostly copied exactly from models in "Godey's Lady's Book"), she could outshine my more plainly dressed aunts—as though anybody would look at her when Aunt Apphia or Aunt Jerry was by! It was true that Aunt Jerry was of a sarcastic turn and loved to make fun of me, and of everything else, when the fit was on her; but she was never subtle and sly, as Cousin Calista often was—and I loved my Aunt Jerry dearly. On the other hand, though the subject was seldom mentioned in my grandfather's family (finance, unless of a national character, being considered there as something quite vulgar)—I knew, from what Shannah O'Flaherty, the cook, had told me, that Cousin Calista was rich. She was the daughter of my grandfather's youngest and dearest sister, who had married a Boston merchant. Both of them had died, and for ten years or more Cousin Calista had been a member of my grandfather's family, and treated exactly as if

she had been his daughter. I used to fancy that Cousin Calista felt above the rest of us on account of her wealth, and that the reason why she snubbed Aunt Apphia was because of this superior feeling—but that may not have been so, for she was always loving and kind to grandfather and grandmother, and extravagantly fond of Aunt Leah, with whom she roomed. She did not dare to snub Aunt Jerry, who was a perfect Tartar, on occasion,—but she was undeniably unkind, and even ugly, to Aunt Apphia. I used to wonder why Aunt Apphia did not turn upon her and "give her back as good as she sent"—but later I understood.

Grandmother was always mending or knitting. She was fair, fastidious in matters of dress, quiet and dignified in manner, and with blue eyes which had been near-sighted all her life; but she had never worn spectacles, and she could see better then than in her youth —though we are now told that such things do not happen. However that may be, my grandmother, neither at this time, when she must have been about sixty years of age, nor during the twenty years longer that she lived, wore any sort of spectacles, and yet her eyesight

was perfect about the house, and she could see nearly as far out-of-doors as the rest of us could.

Aunt Leah was not as fond of sewing as of reading. Therefore, as she had a good voice and was an excellent reader, she usually read aloud to us in the afternoons. Just now we were in the midst of one of Scott's most exciting novels, which held our attention fairly well, in spite of the delectable expectations which drew our eyes so often toward the windows.

Aunt Apphia was also hemming ruffles, but she had small opinion of silver sewing-birds, and preferred to pin her ruffle to her white sewing-apron. She was helping Cousin Calista, which she often did. Cousin Calista had hinted to Aunt Jerry that it would be acceptable if she, too, should assist in some of the details of that wonderful dimity gown; but it would have to be a dull day when Aunt Jerry hemmed ruffles for Cousin Calista. They were outwardly friendly enough, but it was a condition of armed neutrality rather than of affectionate sisterhood.

I remember that I was "over-and-overing," as usual, on my patchwork. My aunts had all

been compelled to work samplers, but that custom had died out by this time, and I never worked a sampler. Aunt Apphia cut and basted my pieces and matched my colors, and encouraged me from time to time when my thread knotted or broke, or I made some bad mistake.

From my seat by her side at the east window I could look into the parlor across the hall, on the western side of our big, plain old colonial house. Every speck of dust had been removed from it, and the wall paper (covered with a queer old pattern, in which a blindfolded little girl was driving a little boy, with long scarfs for reins) had been polished, as far up as Aunt Jerry's strong arms could reach. All of the wonderful shells and lacquer boxes and gift annuals and daguerreotypes, with which the cabinet and mantelpiece there were furnished forth, had been arranged to the best possible advantage, and Cousin Calista's harp, a very handsome one, with a gilded frame, occupied a prominent position. These fine young men should see when they came—if they ever did come—that the Wells family was not entirely destitute of culture.

The great clock in the dining-room had just

struck three, and we had been sitting in the east room for nearly an hour, when there was a sudden sound of pounding feet on the bridge. Aunt Leah stopped in the middle of a sentence, Aunt Jerry uttered a stifled scream of delight, and I boldly stood up and looked out of the window. Sure enough, there they were—the heroes of the runaway—one on a beautiful pure white horse, and the other on a bay one. Their picturesque, workaday garments were replaced by riding suits of the latest style. They threw themselves gracefully from their saddles, hitched their steeds, one to the post and one to the fence, and without a trace of embarrassment came walking up the short, stone-paved, box-bordered path to the front door. George Holly, who was ahead, must have lifted the brass knocker.

"I am the one who should let them in," said Aunt Apphia.

"Let Shannah go," suggested Cousin Calista haughtily.

"Take them into the parlor," gasped Aunt Leah.

"I am the one who should receive them," repeated Aunt Apphia, with dignity, "and of course I should take them into the parlor."

These hurried remarks were interchanged while the young men were tying their horses, and by the time the clang of the knocker was heard, Aunt Apphia was at the east-room door, with me at her heels. I heard Cousin Calista mutter, as we stood there, "Cherub, as usual, in attendance."

Nothing could exceed the grace with which Aunt Apphia grasped Mr. Holly's hand and welcomed him, laughing, and yet showing emotion, as she said, "Hail, my kind benefactor!"

"And this is really you again!" he cried, stopping a moment to gaze at her, though his friend was pressing up impatiently behind him. "And how well you look! You seem to be none the worse for it all—but it was a pretty reckless thing. I hope you won't try it again soon."

"Oh, I have had the best of care," she smiled back to him, as she motioned him into the parlor and shook hands with Richard Perrine. "My father and mother have been eager to see you both and thank you. Oh, we are all very glad to see you."

"I think she is saying too much," I heard Cousin Calista confide to Aunt Jerry, as the young men and Aunt Apphia disappeared into

the parlor. Then I heard that spirited maiden rejoin tartly, "I don't see what less she could possibly say to men who have just saved her life."

Then Aunt Leah whispered in an agitated voice, "Shall we all go in together? We hadn't better all go in together, had we?" And my grandmother said, in a stately and sophisticated manner, "I will go in first, of course—then you, Calista—and in about ten minutes, Jerusha, you and Leah will come. In the meantime, Leah, go down into the field and call your father. He must put on his long coat—mind, his long coat—tell him."

Then grandmother sailed forward into the plain little entry with such a grand air that she almost ran over poor me in the corner, waiting uncertainly as to what I ought to do. As it was, I went for my own small chair, and followed on after her, shaking hands with the young men, and then dragging my chair to Aunt Apphia's side. There I possessed myself of her hand, and clung to it tightly, while I listened with my usual interest to all that was said.

At first there was a simple outpouring of thanks on the part of my grandmother, and

a strong disclaimer of any special merit on the part of the young men. It was not long before Cousin Calista was the center of the conversation. She had taken her place exactly between the two young men. After a little, they had asked her to play to them on her harp, and she was just about to do so when my grandfather entered (in his long coat). Aunt Jerry and Aunt Leah were close behind him.

Then the talk became general again. I remember feeling very proud of my grandfather, who was a gentleman through and through, though he was only a country lawyer, a village "square," who never could have made a living out of his profession if he had not eked out his earnings from that source with the produce of his farm. His words of gratitude were few, but they rang true, and the young men received them with the greatest respect. George Holly flushed up to his handsome temples when grandfather took his hand, and, turning to me, said slowly, "Barbara here, is our treasure. Every one of those yellow curls on her little head is pure gold to us. It goes to my heart like a knife to think of what might have become of her if

it had not been for you. As for what you both did for our Apphia"—his voice broke, and for an instant he could not go on. "Well—I cannot speak of it," he said at last. "Only I want you to know that our hearts are full of gratitude to you both. Remember that my house is open to you as long as I live. Gentlemen, I thank you from the bottom of my soul."

"We would have done a hundred times as much, sir," said Richard Perrine, evidently anxious to turn the conversation into a lighter channel, "to become acquainted with such a bevy of charming girls."

They had all taken their seats now, in obedience to a wave of my grandfather's hand.

"Indeed we would," affirmed George Holly, looking fixedly into my Aunt Apphia's blushing face.

At this point Shannah appeared, bearing a tray of tea and cakes, and soon they all began to talk together very gaily.

"We have hitherto accepted the belief that we must go to the city to enjoy the society of gentlemen," remarked Cousin Calista coyly. "We never expect to meet them up here—to any extent," she added, hurriedly,

as she saw signs of indignation on Aunt Leah's fair face.

"Indeed, we have a few fine young men here—several who are in college or just out of it," declared Aunt Leah with emphasis.

"Our place up in the hills is so far away from the village that we have had so far no chance to test the social resources of the community," said Mr. Holly politely. "You are the first young ladies to whom we have spoken since we left Boston, ten weeks ago—and we have seen almost as few young men—or, indeed, anybody else."

"You are opening a mine in the town of Hickory?" inquired my grandfather, studiously attempting to express a proper interest without vulgar curiosity.

"Yes," answered George Holly. "We are both of us mining engineers. My home was once in the South, but my friend is from Boston, where I now nominally reside with him. We studied together, and we have worked a good deal together down in the Alleghanies and out in the Michigan peninsula."

"Indeed!" said my grandfather. "You must understand mining pretty well, then.

And do you find traces of valuable minerals on the farm of Jed Sears? I was told that that was where you were at work. Excuse me, but you know this is a small community, and news travels fast, especially when there is such an excitement as a runaway to stir people up. Hickory is the next town to Birchmont, and what affects one usually interests the other."

"Yes, sir—yes, sir—certainly," replied George Holly courteously, but with a slight air of embarrassment. "We find several good minerals up in the rocks there—but we are not sure of extracting anything in large enough quantities to pay. We have two men working for us, and we have already quite a hole in the ground. I wish you would come up there and see what we are doing. If you would be interested, we will bring you specimens of our ore the next time that we come down."

That pleased us all, for it looked as though they intended to come again soon.

"Thank you," returned my grandfather. "I am not a geologist, and I fear I could not say anything which would help you. What I learned in college about such matters

was trifling, and my law books have taught me nothing in that line. But I am greatly interested in the development of our county, and I wish that you might dig out of Jed Sears's farm gold and silver beyond the dreams of avarice."

Richard Perrine laughed. There was a note of bitterness in his voice.

"It will be fool's gold, I fear," he said.

"At least, you have found warm friends," interposed my grandmother cordially. "Mr. Wells, since these young men have been able to ride so far to inquire after the health of our young people, perhaps they will not think it beyond their power to dine with us soon. Will next week Friday be a convenient day for you, gentlemen? We dine at one o'clock."

The young men looked at each other with a decidedly pleased expression, and Mr. Holly accepted her invitation for them both without condition. The young ladies frankly giggled at his eager manner. It was plain to see, and not surprising to those who knew the resources of the Jed Sears farm, that the prospect of a dinner party was highly gratifying to them. Possibly rumors had reached them

of the qualities of our Irish cook, Shannah. Certainly the fame of my grandmother's jams, jellies and pickles was wide enough to have penetrated even to the wilds of Hickory.

The young men stayed exactly forty-five minutes by the clock, finishing their call by a visit to the garden—a long, straight path, bordered by china pinks, just then budding; and gay with grape hyacinths in full bloom, moss pinks, jonquils, daffodils, snow-drops, and many other bright blossoms. There was a feeling among us all, when they took their leave and we heard their horses' feet pounding again over the little bridge, that the afternoon had been a great success. Most of us remained in the parlor, looking from the windows, while grandfather went out to assist them in remounting. Grandmother and Aunt Apphia stood in the doorway, whither we had been majestically forbidden by grandmother to follow them. But we shook our handkerchiefs in good-by to them at the windows, and the young men lifted their hats and looked very proud and handsome as they rode away on their fine horses.

Then we all sat down to talk the affair

over in the east room, except grandmother, who went out to direct Shannah in putting the supper on the table.

As we talked, grandfather sat in front of his table, rather nervously arranging his papers upon it. Presently Aunt Jerry and Aunt Leah began to argue a point in a rather heated tone.

"What is that? What is that, Leah?" said grandmother, coming in suddenly, and taking up her knitting, as she dropped into a chair beside grandfather.

"I was just saying," repeated Aunt Leah rather crossly, "that I think we ought to have asked them to stay to supper—after that long ride—and all."

"But the first time they called," began Aunt Jerry, the great stickler for etiquette.

"We served them with tea and cakes, and have invited them to dinner, Leah," said grandmother in her most regal manner, "and that is enough."

This settled the matter, and Aunt Leah subsided.

"A family of girls like mine," laughed grandfather, with an apologetic note of seriousness in his laugh, "must not be too cor-

dial to young men, even when they save Barbara's life."

I was sitting in my little chair, as usual, beside Aunt Apphia. As grandfather spoke, she caught me up in her arms and kissed me passionately.

"I just love them both!" cried Aunt Jerry impulsively.

"That is very well," went on grandfather, in a hard, dry tone, and looking into Aunt Jerry's flushed face, with an expression of sensitive pride. "As long as you love them both, you are all right. But you must not fall in love with one of them. Remember, we know nothing of either of them, except what we have seen. So far as we can judge, they belong to good families—but they may be already promised in marriage—indeed, they may be married, for aught we know to the contrary. Even if they are free, it is not likely that they are looking for country-bred and portionless maidens—or even maidens, with portions—like our dear Calista, here"—he laughed a little into Cousin Calista's blonde, self-satisfied face; but he went on with a stern sort of determination, which many another similarly poor and proud father

might do well to imitate, "so you will please to remember that, while you must be kind to these good-looking young men, and show proper gratitude, in a maidenly way, for what they have done, you must bear in mind at the same time that they are strangers, after all —and that a certain distance must be kept between you. Let there be no suspicion of coquetry in your conduct."

He looked hard into Aunt Jerry's big, dark eyes, but Aunt Apphia, coloring with a little show of resentment, was the one who spoke.

"Why, father—" she began.

"Oh, Apphia!" he exclaimed, turning upon her a look of ineffable tenderness—"not you —you could not do such a thing. But these other girls—Jerusha and Calista here—they need warning. I suppose Leah is safe."

Aunt Leah bent lower over her embroidery, and gave a conscious giggle.

"But, all the same," he went on unsparingly, "I want to impress it upon your minds once for all—for it is a distasteful subject, and I shall probably never revert to it again —that young women in your situation cannot keep too careful a guard over your feelings where young men like these are concerned.

They often leave behind them a trail of unhappy memories, and even of broken hearts, when they mean to do no harm. That is all."

The family sat very still until he had uttered the last word. The good sense and the paternal love and pride in them impressed even my childish mind. Aunt Apphia looked off dreamily toward the hill at the north. Cousin Calista wore a rather disdainful air, partly bored and partly annoyed. Grandmother knitted quietly on; but she laid down her work with a slight sigh of relief when Shannah's clear Irish voice proclaimed that supper was ready.

V

SHANNAH

"You are so good that I believe you would go to heaven, even though there were no Sunday, and only six working days in the week."

Horace Walpole to Hannah More.

CHAPTER V

Shannah

SHANNAH O'FLAHERTY was to my body what Aunt Apphia was to my soul. A great, homely, raw-boned, black-haired woman, but kind and faithful, she had lived in our family longer than I had. She had come to my grandmother directly from the ship which had brought her from the old country, and one of her first requests upon reaching the house, was, as I have often heard my grandmother say, for "a hetchel to hetchel her hair." She sang low, minor Irish songs about her work, and talked with a strong burr.

Through all my early childhood she was my devoted nurse. In winter she used to put me into a big pan and slide me over the little ponds which were continually forming and freezing in the wide yard. In the summer, she was always ready to take me down to the brook in the hot twilights, and sit beside a

certain rather deep pool there, in which I was allowed to splash, clad in an old calico gown. Sometimes, she even arrayed herself likewise and went in with me. If I committed any childish misdemeanor, in the way of unlawful drafts upon the pantry, it was Shannah who hid my sins and covered up my transgressions. My love for her was second only to that which I cherished for my Aunt Apphia. The rest of the family were almost as fond of her as I was, while her keen wit kept us all in good humor.

I remember well one day when she told me how she decided to come to America.

"Thin," she concluded, "I picked up me accoutermints—and here I am."

I puzzled over the long word for days, not liking to ask her what it meant, and finally had to inquire its significance of Aunt Apphia.

Shannah was of a rather tumultuous and tempestuous disposition, and when this got the upper hand of her, as it not infrequently did, she seemed to find peace only in profanity. My grandmother, after violent efforts, had succeeded in breaking her of the worst of this, but she still clung to "gosh," "cracky," and "I gollies." One day, Aunt

Leah, who was as delicate in her sensibilities as in her fair, blonde person, expostulated with Shannah for her use of "I gollies."

"Indade, an' that's no swearin', Miss Leah," protested Shannah vehemently. "There's no praste would blame me for thot. An' whin St. Peter is afther askin' me what is the worst thing I'll be afther sayin', an' I tell him, 'It's naught worse than "I gollies," your riverence,' he will say, 'Get right in wid you, Shannah,' an' it's wide he will open the gates for me. Oh, there's nothin' of the swearin' about 'I gollies,' Miss Leah. An honest girl must have some word or another to expriss herself wid—indade, an' she must."

"Yes, but even if it isn't wicked, it isn't lady-like. It is vulgar, Shannah—and you want to be a lady."

"Indade, an' I don't thot, Miss Leah," retorted Shannah unexpectedly. "Do you think that I look like that much of a fool that I'd be thinkin' of bein' a lady! Sure, an' I know it's niver a lady I can be—I'm afther bein' something better than a lady, Miss Leah"—with an expressive nod, and lowering her voice mysteriously. "It's a saint—thot's what I want to be, Miss Leah—and it's a saint

I'm afther expictin' to be in the next world—plaze God—an' St. Peter willin'."

The days of the week were to Shannah Monda, Choosda, Wednesda, and so on. On very hot, cold or stormy days the weather was always "fierce." This was a much overworked word with her, and we always wondered just what she thought it meant. One day when she was feeling wretchedly ill, but insisted upon being around the house and doing what she could, she sank almost fainting into a chair, and sobbed out, "Oh, Mrs. Wells—it's fierce I feel the dah-y!"

Long words were always attractive to Shannah, and she would remark on a stormy day, when she wished to be especially elegant, "Isn't this la*ment*able weather!"

One day a man came to the door to sell some patent contrivance for which we had no use. Shannah did not think it worth while to trouble grandmother about it, and insisted that she knew we did not want it. The man urged and urged, but Shannah was firm, and, of course, conquered in the end.

"He was very dignified about it, Mrs. Wells," she reported later. "It is very digni-

fied that he was. Indade, he was downright sassy."

One of her most cherished possessions was a little leather locket, in which, under glass, was a lock of fine, dark brown hair. This she confided to me one day when I was very small, was a relic of St. Anthony, her patron saint. It had belonged to her brother.

"An' many's a scrape it got him out of—the harum-scarum!" she said devoutly. "An' whin he lay a-dyin', a big tree havin' fallen over forninst him, he gave me the relic wid his last breath—the poor colleen!—an' niver a day is Shannah widout it, darlin'. Sure it would go hard wid me, swateheart, if I lost me relic—an' ye must see, Miss Barbara, that it's buried wid me whin me time comes, won't ye?"—which request I readily granted, and many years later I hung the worn and cherished relic around Shannah's faithful neck after her labors were ended.

It was her belief that this relic had been the means of procuring for her a small "pinsion," a very modest sum, which she received quarterly from some great family in Ireland, on account of services which had been ren-

dered by her father. I think he had saved the life of the son and heir, and had asked upon his death that the "pinsion" should be continued to Shannah, so long as she should remain single. She used often to say to me that that was why she had never married.

"Me pinsion would stop, darlin'," she would whisper, with a knowing wink. "An' what man would be afther givin' me that same? Shannah's the wise bird."

I did not believe that anybody had ever asked poor Shannah to marry him, for even my childish eyes, much as I loved her, could see that she was not of what is called "the marrying kind"—but I could see, also, that she firmly believed that, if she should set out with determination in pursuit of a husband, the relic could be depended upon to procure one for her. I wondered later why a tree should have fallen on her brother when he was protected by this puissant charm, but I never dared to ask her.

One day a cousin from a neighboring town came to call upon her. Shannah showed her the relic, and related eloquently how her brother had never been without it, when the cousin burst forth effusively, "An' he was a

pious boy—was Dennis. An' it's beautiful that he kept his relic so ch'ice, Shannah—an' whin I think of me own relic—it's a bead blessed by the very hand of St. Patrick, Shannah—an' it's knockin' around in me trunk that it is, this very dah-y—I belave on me soul that me bad luck is to blame to it."

After the cousin left, Shannah and I, who had walked together a half-mile or more down the road with her, to a point where she was to take a stage, had one of our long, confidential talks. It was a day or two after the young men had called, and about four o'clock in the afternoon, so that Shannah was at leisure. I was pretty well over my bruises, but she insisted that we should sit awhile on a big rock beside the quiet road, in order that I might rest after the cousin had left us.

Now Shannah's relic had not much impressed me, but when I heard of the cousin's also, the accumulated evidence alarmed me. I felt as though, having nothing of the sort about me, I was dangerously exposed to ill-fortune.

"Shannah," I said, after we had sat awhile in silence on the rock, "I wish I had a relic.

Then would you make me a little bag and let me wear it always around my neck?"

"Sure, I'll ask the praste about it the very next time I go to town," said Shannah, kindly. "Yes—you ought to have a relic, Barbara, dear—sure, you ought. Oh"—she sighed presently, "if only Miss Affie had had a relic, it mightn't have gone that bad with her?"

"What mightn't, Shannah? The runaway?"

"Ah, bless the dear heart! She thinks nothing ever happened but the runaway! Ah, no, darlint—it was thot much worse than the runaway as the runaway was worse than you an' me sittin' comfortable here by the roadside. Oh, the poor heart!"

Now there was nothing which delighted me more than to have Shannah tell me the family secrets, of which she knew nearly all. She would have died rather than reveal them to an outsider, but she felt that I belonged to the sacred circle, and she loved to make me happy by gratifying my curiosity. My aunts would have been appalled if they could have known the sidelights which were thrown upon their affairs for me by Shannah's graphic descriptive powers. But I never betrayed that faith-

ful soul, and she rewarded my fidelity by telling me as much as she dared. I can see now that this outlet must have been almost a necessity for poor Shannah, who was cut off from more than a very occasional visit with her kindred, and who had almost no friends of her own social standing in the neighborhood. All of the rest of the family were good to her, but she stood in awe of them, and when she felt like talking, she had to talk to me or nobody.

"What hurt her, Shannah?" I demanded. "What was it? Tell me."

"Oh, it was Lyman Baker—Mr. Lyman Baker—Lord rest his soul, Miss Barbara! An' how Miss Calista can sleep o' nights, is more than I can tell, Miss Barbara—but she gave me her old gingham last week—an' it's not for the loikes o' me to be afther blamin' Miss Calista—but she made a la*ment*able business with Mr. Lyman Baker—she did thot, oh, me! oh, me!"

Shannah began to rock back and forth.

"I remember Mr. Lyman Baker," I remarked reflectively. "I remember when he died and they buried him up here in the graveyard. That was when I was five years old.

L. of C.

It was on my birthday he was buried, and I couldn't have any party, but you made me a cake."

"Bless its heart—an' she remembers the cake Shannah made for her! An' even Miss Calista was afther sobbin' the day. Oh, she better be sobbin', indade she had—the spalpeen! Oh, ye must excuse Shannah, darlint—but, good as Miss Calista is to me—an' she gave me a whole dollar on me last birthda'—I can't get the better of the way she trated poor Miss Apphia thin—oh, it was la*ment*able, darlint—it was thot—an' only Shannah knows it all—an' Shannah can never tell—an' mind ye kapes your own little mouth shut about it, swateheart—only sometimes I'm afther thinkin' that Miss Affie knows it."

She nodded at me, darkly, shutting her great lips tight together.

"I remember that he used to come every day," I began meditatively, "and he used to take me in his lap—and I liked him—and then he didn't come—and then he was sick a long time—and then he died. What made him die, Shannah?"

"They said it was quick consumption,

swateheart—but I'm thinkin' it was consumption o' the heart—indade I am."

Shannah's brows were still knitted ominously together.

"What gave him consumption of the heart, Shannah?"

"Because his heart was broken, darlint—thot's what Shannah's afther thinkin'—an' thot's what Miss Calista knows, too—she does thot, an' on his death-bed he sint for Miss Affie—didn't ye be afther knowin' thot, darlint?"

"No, I remember that they were all crying—and I cried, too—and everybody was still and sorry—but what was it, Shannah—what was it? Why did he send for Aunt Affie when he was dying?"

Shannah shook her head.

"Oh, it was in a mystery he was, the poor dear! An' I heard Miss Calista—an' me a-lyin' one hot night that Septimber, behint the snowball bush to the end of the yard, darlint—an' a-winkin' me eyes out, bein' thot sleepy—when comes along Miss Calista and Mr. Lyman Baker an' sat down beyant, an' me just afther wakin' out of me doze wid the

sound of their voices, an' thot scart to stir, that I lay there wid the sweat drippin' off me into the grass, darlint—it was thot; an' so I heard ivery cruel worrud, an' not a worrud could I be sayin', I, Shannah O'Flaherty, that knew it for a lie, thin, an' iver afther—I did thot, darlint."

"Did he say something about Aunt Affie?" I whispered, angrily.

"Oh, ye needn't whisper, darlint. Sure, who could hear us, here on the rock wid niver a bush in sight? Indade, it wasn't Mr. Lyman Baker would be afther sayin' a worrud against yer Aunt Affie, darlint, an' him worshippin' the sod she trod on, he did thot. Oh, no, it was Miss Calista—an' it was the cat she played thot night—it was indade, Miss Barbara. An' she a-tellin' him thot Miss Affie was engaged to a young man in the city, an' she knew it for sure, says Miss Calista to him; indade, she did thot. An' niver will I forget it of her, for it killed him, an' she may give me gingham dresses an' dollars to me dyin' day. An' thin he gets up shorrutly—oh, a foine young man was Mr. Lyman Baker! An' thot's what Miss Calista thought; indade, she did, Miss Barbara; an' it was for herself she

wanted him. Oh, Shannah's the wise bird! An' off he walks, an' niver again did he come to the Square's house." Shannah laughed grimly. "Thim thot wanted to get him away from Miss Affie niver got him, Miss Barbara, d'ye mark thot? But it killed him, an' thot's sure. An' so it has always been—whin Miss Affie has a beau; an' sure ivery man thot sees her can't get the better of lovin' her, though it's a brave one thot dursts to shpake up to her, she's thot proud in her way, kind an' lovin' as she is, but niver does Miss Affie have a beau but Miss Calista is afther wantin' him too, an' niver another wan, but indade it's the same wan, or none at all. An' I'm thot out of conceit with Miss Calista sometimes, thot I am, Miss Barbara, thot I'll be afther shpakin' out to her sometime whin I laste desire it; for it's cuttin' me own nose off me face I would be afther doin', for Miss Calista is thot kind to me thot sometimes it's afther comin' over me thot she knows I've sacrets along wid me, swateheart—sacrets thot she wouldn't want told out, darlint—an' indade I have. But we must bear wid her, sure, for it's Miss Calista thot has the money, and ivery year she pays the Square a good round

sum, an' what would we be afther doin' widout her, darlint! an' the Square, Lord rist his soul!—talkin' his po'try to himself whin he rides along, an' niver looking out for a cint to come in, an' all the young ladies to buy laces for, and kid shoes—for it's little enough they do be payin' the tachers here, whin they do tache a term—an' Miss Affie sayin' she'll be afther goin' off to tache school in a big city, and earn more money, wan of these days, an' scarin' the Square out of his wits, for he's thot proud thot he can't a-bear the thought o' thim beautiful young ladies a-thravelin' off to distant parts for to worruk for a livin'. An' no more can Shannah, darlint. An' Miss Affie bearin' all that torment from Miss Calista, an' the Square niver noticin' not one worrud of it, Miss Barbara—Miss Affie's thot still an' good about it. An' she's thinkin' Miss Calista's thot fond of you, darlint, thot it's you Miss Calista'll be afther lavin' her money to, wan o' these days."

"I don't want her money!" I cried savagely. "I hate her. She does plague my Aunt Affie. Oh, I hate her," and I dismayed Shannah by beginning to cry.

"An' thot's jist what you mustn't be afther

doin', swateheart," she scolded sternly. "It's niver another story Shannah will be afther tellin' you, if this is the way you'll be actin'. Shtop bawlin' the minute, darlint. Indade, an' you must. Sure, Shannah'll niver tell you another worrud, she won't, indade."

"Oh, yes, you will," I insisted, drying my eyes and calming myself.

"Thin you must be good to your Cousin Calista; you must, indade, for she is always good to you, an' she's aye an' iver bepraisin' your lovely curruls an' your blue eyes an', indade, it's nobody hopes more than Shannah O'Flaherty that she will be afther lavin' you her money—for it's little your poor father left ye, swateheart—an' whin yer weddin' day cooms, you'll be afther wantin' a weddin' portion—like all the rist of the gurruls—an' it's Miss Calista will be afther givin' it to ye, darlint—for she loves you an' Miss Leah—an' we must hold our tongues, darlint—you an' me must be afther doin' jist thot—an' Shannah's the wise bird, swateheart—now be a good gurrul—an' come along, for it's supper time—an' here we are, a long, long way from home."

"And if Aunt Affie had had a relic, wouldn't Mr. Lyman Baker have died?" I asked.

"I belave on my soul he wouldn't, darlint."

"Did she feel very bad about it, Shannah?"

"I can't be tellin' you as to thot, darlint," answered Shannah, shaking her head. "She used to laugh and talk wid him in thot purty way she has—an' it do be me opinion that she might have been makin' ready to fall in love wid him—for he was a foine young man, was Mr. Lyman Baker—but she don't be fallin' in love like some of these hoity-toities, Miss Barbara—not Miss Affie. She kapes herself thot ch'ice an' close—an' she always a-laughin' at the same time—thot you can't tell what she do be thinkin'; but she knows Miss Calista was struck afther him—for Miss Jerry was afther sayin' that jist—an' me right there in the kitchen wid the two of thim—an' Miss Affie only laughed, an' she says to Miss Jerry, says she, 'You're afther thinkin' iverybody is thot ready to fall in love thot you are yourself'—but she knew all the same—for she's a wise bird, is Miss Affie."

And thus I heard the tale of Lyman Baker, of which I had thought much since that night when Silas had spoken of it; and thus many more of the minor family mysteries were

cleared up in my infant mind. And I never betrayed good, gossipy Shannah.

The day before the important dinner, and the following morning were busy times in our household. But grandmother was one of the most punctual of beings, and everything was in readiness for the final preparation and serving by a little after twelve. Then she sent us all upstairs to dress.

VI

WAS SHE JEALOUS?

"She had craft. All hungry things have craft."

The Manxman.

CHAPTER VI

Was She Jealous?

IN those days the young ladies brushed their hair much more than they do now. It seems to me, when I look back upon it, as though my aunts were always brushing their hair. At such times they would gather either in our room or the adjoining one, in which Cousin Calista and Aunt Leah slept, and, slipping on their combing-jackets, would sit down to long confidential discussions, which I loved to hear.

On this great day we were all anxious, naturally, to look our very best. Aunt Jerry went into the other room to help Aunt Leah about something; but Aunt Apphia, bidding me sit still until she was ready to dress me, began to brush her hair, and presently Cousin Calista came in and sat down on the edge of Aunt Jerry's little bed. She was brushing her hair, too.

I crept upon the large white bed in which I slept with Aunt Apphia, and lay there,

patiently waiting until she should be ready to dress me. I have often heard it said that curly hair should never be brushed, but both Aunt Apphia and Cousin Calista had curly, and even "kinky" hair, yet they were always brushing it, and the brushing seemed only to make their curls more beautiful.

"Uncle may say what he likes," Cousin Calista declared with conviction, after sitting still for several minutes, "but I believe they are good, through and through—don't you, Affie?"

It was plain that she meant the heroes of the runaway, though their names had not been mentioned.

"Ye-es," said Aunt Apphia slowly.

"You speak as though there might be some doubt about it," cried Cousin Calista, laboring away at the tangled mass of her curly yellow hair.

"I didn't mean to. I was just thinking that Shannah was always forgetting to sweeten the whipped cream."

"I think that young Holly is rather smitten with you," hazarded Cousin Calista, peeping out teasingly from between her yellow locks.

"I wish you wouldn't use that word," pro-

tested Aunt Apphia with spirit. "I hate it—and there is no occasion for you to use it now, anyway. Mr. Holly and the other one seem to me to treat us all just alike."

"Well, Affie, dear," went on Cousin Calista, in her most good-humoredly mischievous strain, "you can't deny that you are just a little bit carried off your own feet by these good looking youths—now, you know you are."

Aunt Apphia chose to take her lightly.

"What signs do you see?" she said, smilingly.

"Oh, such things can't be set forth in terms," laughed Cousin Calista, "but I can tell just the same. And you like the Holly better than Dick. I can see that, too."

"Don't say 'Dick' in that familiar way, Calista," protested Aunt Apphia. "You will have Barbara here calling him 'Dick.'"

"It's his name, anyhow," chaffed on Cousin Calista; "and you don't like him so well as you do Mr. Holly, do you?"

"Perhaps not quite," admitted Aunt Apphia discriminatingly.

"Neither do I."

There was the slightest possible trace of defiance in Cousin Calista's tone. Aunt Apphia

made no rejoinder, but went on brushing her hair in the high light from the west dormer window.

"I don't see what there is about you, Affie, that makes the men so fond of you," resumed Cousin Calista, in her most exasperating manner. "You are good-looking, but so are the other girls—and you would strike men, I should say, as too cold and too intellectual—but you don't. You have only to look at them—and down they go."

"What perfect nonsense!" ejaculated Aunt Apphia, in her most frigid tone. "When you are in this mood, Calista, it is all that I can do to keep my temper with you."

"Well, you can't deny it," persisted Cousin Calista. "Now, there was"—

"For heaven's sake!" cried Aunt Apphia, showing out the feeling which she had evidently at first determined to conceal, "don't say another word, Calista—not another word—I mean it. Let the past go."

"But there is the present," Cousin Calista kept on. "If rumor is right, there are two or three swains sighing like furnaces at this moment, all for love of you, right here in Birchmont—and I think the elegant Mr. Holly

is going to fall straight into line with the others."

"I wish you wouldn't talk such twaddle before the child," said Aunt Apphia, resuming her temperate tone of a moment before. "It isn't nice, and you know it—and you know it isn't true. Now stop it."

"Highty tighty!" laughed Cousin Calista, who was beginning to curl the long ringlets which hung over her temples. "But"—with a deeper note in her voice—"maybe you won't conquer everybody, Miss Majesty."

"You may be very sure that I shall not try to conquer anybody, not anybody," repeated Aunt Apphia, with warmth.

"If you do, you may get beaten at your own game." The laughter had quite vanished now from Cousin Calista's tone. She almost snapped out these last words, and when she turned toward Aunt Apphia, it seemed as though pale blue flames rayed out of her eyes.

"There will be no 'game,'" said Aunt Apphia coldly. "You shall have everything your own way, Calista—only don't stoop to deceit in order to get it."

There was a pallor on her face and a stern meaning in her tone, which showed that she

was profoundly moved. It was plain that Cousin Calista also was violently agitated, hard as she strove to cover the fact.

I lay perfectly quiet on the bed, apparently drowsing. But I was wide awake to a fact which my childish lips could not have expressed, though my soul perceived it clearly; in spite of my good grandfather's explicit warning, young hearts had kindled and young Romance was in the saddle.

I realized in a vague way, too, Cousin Calista's power, and that she was a spoiled child of fortune, perfectly selfish and unscrupulous. She liked Mr. Holly. She had said so; and I felt that she meant to have him for her own. Girl-children sense these matters before they can begin to formulate them. As I lay there on the bed, all that Shannah had told me rolled over me in a great wave, and I thought to myself, like a little tiger, "If she gets my Mr. Holly away from my Aunt Apphia, I will kill her."

Then Aunt Jerry came in, with her long hair, almost like a shining sheet of purplish black thunder-cloud, hanging to her knees, and Aunt Leah followed, with her long, pale-brown mane hanging, too—almost as long, and

much more even than Aunt Jerry's—and then they all began to wonder how Aunt Apphia had got on so fast—for she was almost dressed.

"Because I have Barbara to get ready," she said, calmly.

Cousin Calista turned to me, lying on the bed. She had no idea that I had understood what had been said, and nothing of my wild passion against her could have shown in my face, for she stooped over me and exclaimed admiringly, "You darling! Isn't she just like a picture, girls? Her hair is like spun gold—and see what a lovely pink spot she has in each cheek."

It might seem as though I would have loved her when she praised me so. She was the only member of the family who flattered me thus openly, and there was no reason to doubt her sincerity. Out of sheer gratitude I ought to have liked her a little, but I did not. I disliked her so much that it was all I could do to mind my manners, according to the instructions which Aunt Apphia and Shannah had given me, and not show my real feelings. Indeed, I never took her hand, nor laid my head on her shoulder, nor submitted in any way to her caresses, unless I fairly had to.

The young men arrived promptly, and the dinner was a great success. My grandmother and the young ladies looked fairly patrician in their fresh sprigged muslins, lockets, neck-ribbons and tortoise-shell combs. The fact was early established that neither of our visitors was married, and certain remarks were made which led all my aunts to assert, the next day, under the vehement leadership of Cousin Calista (when grandfather refused to admit the proofs to be convincing), that they were not even engaged.

The next event to be anticipated was their dinner call. Cousin Calista insisted that it would surely be paid within a week, but Aunt Jerry was equally positive that they would not come for ten or twelve days, at least. She searched through all of the recent issues of the "Home Journal" to prove her point, and read aloud at last triumphantly that, among the most formal circles, the dinner call was now usually paid at any time within the succeeding fortnight.

"That doesn't mean the last week any more than the first week," Cousin Calista insisted.

"But I am sure it is better form to call in

the second than the first," declared Aunt Jerry, dogmatically.

For five afternoons we gathered regularly, as usual, in the east room, with our sewing birds and embroidery and reading, and started up at every noise on the bridge, and craned our necks to see everybody who went by. On the sixth afternoon, however, we made a change. We had all, during the morning, been helping with the housecleaning, some of which had been postponed uncommonly late on account of the cold spring, and grandmother had become so much interested in her labors in a certain part of the attic that she decided to remain there during the afternoon, and had deputed Aunt Jerry to assist her. A neighbor was about to remove to the West, and all of us had called upon her to bid her farewell, except Cousin Calista and Aunt Leah.

"You had better go and get that call done with," advised grandmother.

Cousin Calista and Aunt Leah, after some preliminary discussion, finally decided to go. They relied, more than they would have cared to own, upon Aunt Jerry's infallible prevision in social matters.

So Aunt Apphia and I sat alone in the east room in our afternoon finery, while grandmother and Aunt Jerry, grimy with dust, overturned trunks and boxes, with Shannah's help, in the garret; and Cousin Calista and Aunt Leah sallied forth on a walk of a mile or more to see the departing neighbor. For fifteen minutes after they had gone we sat quietly sewing and chatting together, when suddenly there came a familiar pounding on the bridge —the sound for which we had listened for days. On the instant, Aunt Apphia turned perfectly white, and I thought again of my grandfather's warning words; but she looked quite like herself by the time that the young men had come in and taken seats in the parlor. Then I was sent to summon grandmother and Aunt Jerry, while many apologies were made by Aunt Apphia for the absence of the others.

I had thought I heard a scurrying around upstairs while the young men were alighting, and, sure enough, Aunt Jerry's quick ears had caught the sound of the horses' hoofs almost as soon as ours had, and she did not need any summons to array herself as speedily as possible in her sprigged dimity and to burnish her blue-black hair. She made a most elegant

toilet in an incredibly brief space of time, and soon came into the parlor, flushed from her hurry, and handsomer than ever. I could not help noticing that Richard Perrine brightened up considerably when she appeared, and that he showed her, with remarkable zest and interest, certain mineral specimens which he had brought with him.

"Most of our mine seems to run to this sort of thing," said George Holly, laying a lump of shining ore in Aunt Apphia's small white hand.

She and I looked at it eagerly. It was bright and beautiful, and it seemed to me to be full of diamonds.

"What do you think of it?" he asked Aunt Apphia deferentially.

Her color deepened a little. She evidently did not attach much value to the specimen, fine as it appeared to me, but she did not like to say what she thought.

"I don't know much about mineralogy," she confessed at last, slowly: "but it looks to me like what we children used to call 'fool's gold.'"

Richard Perrine began laughing derisively at his friend.

"Exactly what I have said all along," he declared, triumphantly.

"Yes—but," proceeded Aunt Apphia, "we had a tradition that, though this was worthless, veins of real gold were sure to be found near by—if we only knew how to get at them."

"I'm not so sure that it is worthless," mused George Holly, turning the fragment of rock over and over in his hand.

"Well, we have established the fact that, though it has considerable iron in it, it has no gold nor silver nor copper nor platinum," argued Richard Perrine.

"There are many valuable minerals besides gold, silver, copper and platinum," retorted his friend, with some heat.

"You are going to make discoveries, perchance," laughed Richard Perrine.

"It is not improbable. Discoveries have been made by others."

"That would be fascinating," cried Aunt Jerry. "Oh, I do wish you would discover things in Hickory—sapphires, emeralds—even diamonds—why not? And that reminds me—we have a new flower in our garden. It is just open, and we think it is lovely. Don't you want to come out and see it?"

Richard Perrine rose at once. George Holly followed his example slowly—but Aunt Aphia did not rise.

"The sun is rather hot in the garden," she said. "I think I will not go." There was a little faltering note in her voice, which I did not understand until long afterward. George Holly looked at her with sudden concern.

"You are not ill?" he exclaimed.

"No, no—but I am not quite where I was before the—the runaway. Go out, all of you, and look at the flowers. They are really well worth seeing. Barbara, you had better go with them. I will sit here and sew."

"I would rather stay with you," I ventured, clinging to her gown.

George Holly sank back into his seat.

"I will stay in, too," he said.

"Very well," commented Aunt Jerry, looking not in the least annoyed; "we will go without you",—and she and Richard Perrine, he holding a parasol gallantly over her, went, gaily laughing and talking, around the east corner of the house, over the thick June grass, past the myrtle bed, where the blue periwinkle stars had finished blooming, and past the honeysuckle bower, and the Scotch, and

York-and-Lancaster rose bushes, with buds just beginning to show color, out to the gay garden walk; where they lingered so long that we began to wonder what had become of them.

Not that we had a dull time in the parlor. Far otherwise. I shall never forget the anxiety with which, as soon as the others had left the room, George Holly moved up closer to Aunt Apphia, and began to inquire about her health.

"You seemed well on the day when we came to dinner," he said, in a half-injured tone. "You said that you felt quite well again. I had worried before that for fear that you might have suffered some internal hurt—one of that dreadful sort which are slow in developing and then equally slow to cure—but since then I have felt easier about you."

"You are good to trouble yourself so much about me," she said, in a way which seemed to me pretty cold and formal, considering that she was talking to a man who had saved both of our lives, only a few short weeks before. I could see that he felt it just as I did.

"Good!" he cried. "Why, don't you understand, after that day, you and the child here were all that Dick and I thought of for days and days? In fact, we haven't thought

of much else since. And you don't know what it has been to us to find such a family to come and talk with about our work and the other trifles of our existence. It has been almost like getting home again. Oh, by the way, am I not to see your mother? We both of us want to tell her how much we enjoyed our visit here the other day. That dinner was one of the events of our lives."

Aunt Apphia explained about the attic and how grandmother would not let any hands but her own touch certain sacred trunks.

"I am sorry that she cannot stop long enough to let us speak with her a few moments," he said in a hurt way. He did not realize that proud old grandmother would rather have died than to have these elegant young men see her in anything less splendid than her dimity gown, her shell side-combs and her brocaded neck-ribbon. Her attic-cleaning garb was quite another story.

"I am sorry, and so is she, and it is too bad that my Cousin Calista and my sister Leah should not be here," apologized Aunt Apphia, looking anxiously out at the window.

"I should like to see them," returned George Holly, smilingly but coolly. "How-

ever, I am having a good time, as things are—only, I do not like to hear that you are not well."

"Oh, it isn't anything but an incipient headache," explained Aunt Apphia. "I am usually perfectly well, but ever since our accident I have had a tendency to headache. And then" —she put on an arch look which I loved to see, and which she always assumed when she confessed to grandmother any little misdemeanor,—"I must own that I sat up last night, after I went to my room, until long after Barbara and my sister Jerry were asleep. I had such an interesting book!"

"Tell me about it."

"Oh, it was only a novel, but something very different from other books. The name of it is 'Jane Eyre.'"

"Oh, yes, I have read it," he said eagerly.

"Do you like novels? Do you read many of them?"

"Not many. I have been so long studying geologies and geographies and such like works that I have pretty much lost my appetite for fiction. Other books seem to me much more thrilling and exciting, as a general thing. But

I have read your 'Jane Eyre,' and I think it is fine."

"Do you? So do I, but I never could have cared for that Rochester."

"No? Why, I thought he was a regular woman's hero?"

"Not mine," laughed Aunt Apphia.

VII

AN OLD BLACKSMITH

"Talking over books in company draws people together or drives them apart. It never leaves them quite where it found them."

Helen Dawes Brown.

CHAPTER VII

An Old Blacksmith

"WHAT were his defects?" he inquired.

"Oh, I like a gentleman."

"A prig? A goody-goody?"

"It would take a deal of courage in these days to admit that one likes a hero who is good," she laughed. "Somehow good people seem to be under a ban. One must admit that one is or has been pretty wicked in order to be admired. I must be hard to suit, though, for I didn't like St. John any better than Rochester."

"You are decidedly captious," he laughed. "Have you ever read a book whose hero you liked?"

"No," she confessed.

"But you may have seen a good hero in real life, perhaps?"

A flush crept over her face, which was radiant and blithe—her most winning expression.

"I—I don't know," she faltered. "I should

have to think. Have you ever seen your ideal heroine?"

"Yes," he answered, with embarrassing promptness.

"That is interesting, but I don't quite understand. Was it in a book that you saw her —or in the flesh?"

"Oh, quite in the flesh, I assure you. She is undoubtedly real."

"Let me tell you a secret," she confided to him. "I have always cherished a dream of writing a novel, but I could never construct a heroine to satisfy me. Tell me about yours. Perhaps she will please me, too."

"But have you a hero for your great work?"

"I think I have—oh, yes, I am pretty sure I have." Aunt Apphia smiled gaily.

"Tell me about him."

"No—the heroine first, please."

"Well," he began, moving his chair up a little nearer still, and looking with a certain air of bravery into Aunt Apphia's laughing hazel eyes; "she is not a city girl. All of the city girls whom I know are too—well—artificial, conventional, vain. I don't know just what to call them, but I like the country girls better."

His face was paling a little now, and his courage seemed to be ebbing; while her face was growing redder, and she moved uneasily in her seat. I could even feel her trembling slightly as I sat leaning against her in my little chair, with her arm around me—a beautiful round white arm, the flowing sleeve falling away from it almost to the elbow. I saw George Holly look at it admiringly more than once.

"I am sorry to hear that," she breathed doubtfully. "My heroine is to be a city-bred girl. I do love beautiful manners—and only city-bred girls have those—or they certainly have the best. You must admit that."

"Indeed, I admit nothing of the sort," he argued stoutly. "You had better take my country girl. She has good enough manners for anybody."

"She is not going to do for me—not at all." Aunt Apphia shook her head emphatically, so that her dark red curls drooped bewitchingly forward over her face. "In fact," she laughed, "I am so sure that I shall not put her into my novel that I don't believe I care to hear anything more about her."

"But suppose I want to tell you?"

"No, no," she insisted, shaking her curls still further over her face.

"She can ride a horse better than anybody else on earth," he pursued firmly.

"That is not so bad," she admitted. "I do admire good horsemanship."

"I told you that you would like her if you would only let me describe her," he asserted triumphantly. "Then she has dark red hair, with fascinating bronze lights playing over it —the most beautiful hair in the world."

There was a slight dreaminess in his tone, and I somehow seemed to see him again, sitting beside Witch Brook, with Aunt Apphia in his arms. She could not lift her eyes to his now, and through her curling tresses I could see that the color in her cheeks was fading away.

"That—that is not my choice at all," she stammered. "My heroine must have golden hair—like Barbara's. Oh, here come the girls!"

She sprang up with an air of relief, but I felt very cross with her, not only because I had been enjoying the rather sentimental conversation which she and Mr. Holly had been holding, and hated to have it interrupted, but

because by her sudden movements she had disarranged my flossy curls and slightly wrenched my confiding little arms.

Mr. George Holly stood erect to receive the young ladies, and his dark, handsome face, with its small side-whiskers, such as "Godey's" assured us were the proper kind to wear, looked as calm and self-possessed as ever.

Cousin Calista met him effusively, but as soon as the others began talking together, she whispered to me, "Where is your Aunt Jerry? And didn't Mr. Perrine come?"

"Yes; they are in the garden," I whispered back to her.

"And why didn't you and Aunt Affie go, too?"

"Aunt Affie's head ached."

"Humph!" groaned Cousin Calista. "How long have they been gone?"

"Oh, a little while," I answered vaguely.

"And you and Aunt Affie and Mr. Holly have been sitting here, have you?"

"Yes."

"What have you been doing?"

"Talking."

"What have you been talking about?"

"Oh, books—and ore—and heroes, and things," I replied comprehensively.

"Heroes and things!" repeated Cousin Calista, through teeth rather closely shut together. But she had no chance to get anything further out of me, for by this time Aunt Jerry and Mr. Perrine had come in, both of them in high spirits and laughing immoderately at what appeared to be nothing in particular, and grandfather followed almost immediately afterward. Then there was a new discussion of the lumps of ore, which grandfather agreed with Aunt Apphia in thinking only the old-fashioned "fool's gold," a sort of iron pyrites, which, so far as he knew, had never been of the slightest use to anybody.

"But Miss Apphia said that there was a tradition in her childhood that real gold lay not far from it," pleaded George Holly defensively.

"I never saw any real gold anywhere near it," laughed my grandfather. "There is a large vein of this fool's gold in my pasture. We had occasion to blast up there a few years ago, and we discovered a great bed of it—but nothing better has turned up since."

Raspberry shrub and cake were brought in

now by Shannah, and while we were partaking of these refreshments, grandfather talked with George Holly about the mine. It appeared that the young men had dug down a hundred feet.

"Why don't you make an elbow now?" inquired my grandfather. "That's what they do, isn't it—make an elbow?"

It was plain to me that my grandfather had no confidence that any profit would ever come from this mine.

"Yes," said George Holly. "We shall make an elbow at once. We are only feeling around to decide in which direction we shall turn off. You must certainly come up soon and see what a big hole we have made in the hillside. We have four men working up there now."

"Do you feel justified in investing much more money there?" inquired my grandfather, kindly. "You must have put a good deal in already."

"Oh—only a few hundreds," replied George Holly, carelessly. "I shouldn't feel satisfied to stop for awhile yet."

"How long do you mean to keep on?"

"A year was what we planned. Dick here

gets rather impatient sometimes—but I think we shall hang on for a year."

"Well—I don't know much about such matters—but there are ever so many ways of investing money besides dropping it down into these hills." My grandfather was evidently trying, without hurting their feelings, to convey a warning to these rash youths against throwing away their capital.

"But I am a mining engineer," explained George Holly, with a touch of pride in his tone. "If I were not here, I should be at the same sort of thing somewhere else. I shall always be delving in some mine."

"But there are mines which contain something besides fool's gold," my grandfather reminded him laughingly.

The young man smiled back to him respectfully, but he answered, in a firm tone, "This may, you know, sir—or the fool's gold may prove to be worth, if not as much as real gold, still enough to pay for the mining, and more."

"Very true, very true," assented grandfather, heartily. "I admire your pluck and perseverance, and I hope you will get your reward. It was certainly a fine thing for my

family that you came to Hickory. Some of us might not have been alive to-day if it had not been for you, and it is very pleasant to have you drop in to see us. Of course," my grandfather lowered his voice a little, "our girls are only country lasses, and you are accustomed to more sophisticated young ladies, but——"

"I never saw young ladies anywhere," broke in George Holly, eagerly, in a tone as low as my grandfather's, but full of feeling, "so beautiful, or so good as your daughters, or better mannered."

"Thank you—thank you," said my grandfather. "You are very kind. Without disparaging your veracity, I understand that in good society in our cities it is the way to dwell most, and rather emphatically, upon the pleasant things—but I thank you."

He shook his guest's hand as he spoke, but his rugged face looked moist and not entirely happy.

The young men made a very slow farewell. Cousin Calista was begging for a picnic. They thought that the time was ripe for the long-promised excursion to Witch Brook, but my

grandfather was very busy, and Elihu, who had just come home from college, was very busy, too.

"I think that is too hard and long a trip for this time of year, when our men are so busy," decided grandmother. "Why cannot we have one of our delightful suppers on the Indian grave? We have scarcely been up there this summer."

A supper on an Indian grave did not seem, at first, to sound attractive to our guests. It was explained to them that the grave was really not a grave at all, but simply a beautiful little mound up in our pasture, on which checkerberries and princess' pine grew, and which, as it stood just above a blood-curdling precipice, commanded a magnificent view.

"There is a wonderful grove close by, and it is the prettiest spot you ever saw. No Indian was ever really buried there, you know," explained Cousin Calista in her most bewitching manner and winking her eyes languishingly in George Holly's direction.

So it was decided that we should have a picnic supper in full view of the sunset on the Indian grave a week from that very day. Two or three of Elihu's college mates were in-

tending to visit him about that time, and my aunts volunteered to invite one or two of their special friends among the village girls, and we were all sure that we should have a fine time.

Just as the young men had bidden us all good-by and were standing out by the fence untying their horses, a singular-looking figure came along the street. It was a familiar one to us, but Mr. Holly and Mr. Perrine had never chanced before to encounter poor old "Uncle" Ezra Parkins, a harmless lunatic, once the village blacksmith, but stunned and crazed many years before by a blow on his head. In one hand Uncle Ezra carried a sort of a whiplash of grass on which he was perpetually braiding. With the other he suddenly lifted up the left hind leg of George Holly's beautiful white mare.

"Ain't shod right! Ain't shod right!" he exclaimed, in a queer, cracked voice.

"I would thank you, sir, to let my horse alone," said George Holly haughtily.

"Oh, ho! Oh, ho! You would, would ye?" mocked the old man, incensed at George Holly's tone and manner.

We were all standing close beside the front door. Now my grandfather stepped forward

with dignity. I shrank a little closer to Aunt Apphia. Everybody considered Uncle Ezra as harmless, I knew, but, all the same, I was afraid of him, and so were many others among the village children.

"It is all right—it is all right, Mr. Parkins," interposed my grandfather conciliatingly.

"No, it ain't all right, either," affirmed the lunatic irritably. "That shoe ain't right. If I had my shop here now, I would fix it. 'Tain't right."

The young men had mounted by this time and stood waiting, each with his hat in his left hand, until my grandfather should have concluded his conversation.

"You are an excellent blacksmith, as we all know, Mr. Parkins," went on my grandfather soothingly, "but this gentleman understands his horse, and he doesn't think it is quite polite for you to meddle with her."

Several of the village men, who happened to be passing, loitered a little in order to look at the horses and their riders, and to listen to whatever might be said. Uncle Ezra drew back toward the fence, braiding fiercely away at his grass whiplash and muttering crossly to him-

self. As the young men drove off, replacing their hats on their heads and sitting very straight and elegant in their saddles as they cantered across the bridge, the crazy man pointed to them sullenly and said, "Who be they, Square?"

"They are some young men who are working a mine up in Hickory, Mr. Parkins."

"Wa'al, darn 'em for a high-feelin', stuck-up pair!" cried the old man wrathfully. "I say, darn 'em!"

"Oh, they are good enough young men," laughed my grandfather. "They simply don't know you as we do. They are fond of their horses, and Mr. Holly probably thought you oughtn't to meddle with his. You mustn't mind them, Mr. Parkins. They are not used to our ways."

But the old man was not easily quieted.

"Workin' a mine, be they?" he muttered. "They'll mine fool's gold, an' that's all—an' it's good enough for them darned high-steppers —I swan it is."

He wandered off, with his ill-humor not in the least mollified.

I remember that I spoke up angrily to my grandfather, "Uncle Ezra is a cross old man,

isn't he, grandpa? Mr. Holly did not do anything bad, did he?"

"He spoke a little more sharply than he needed to, Barbara, to such an old and feeble man."

"I thought he spoke altogether too sharply," said Aunt Leah.

Cousin Calista laughed scornfully.

"This is what I call a tempest in a teapot," she flung out, as she turned to walk into the east room. "It was quite right for him to stop instantly any fooling with that beautiful horse. How did he know what that old idiot was going to do? He might have lamed her for life."

I looked up appealingly into Aunt Apphia's face. I knew that she would see the matter in exactly the right light.

"I would rather he had spoken more gently, darling," she whispered into my ear. "I shouldn't wish to blame him, for he didn't mean any harm. He was a little excited, and, as grandpa said, he isn't used to our sort of people. It is bad to get excited, because we can't think clearly when we are excited," and this little statement of the case, with the neat moral lesson tacked on for the improvement of

my childish soul, quite satisfied me, as we all went in and sat down to supper.

It did, indeed, seem to us as if there had been, as Cousin Calista said, merely "a tempest in a teapot." But only a few days passed before this apparently trifling incident loomed up like a Brocken specter, and chilled us all with an unspoken terror.

VIII

AN INDISCRETION

"How preach to a creature on the bend of passion's rapids? One might as well read a chapter from the Bible to a delirious patient."

George Meredith.

CHAPTER VIII

An Indiscretion

ON the very day before the Saturday which had been set for the picnic, Elihu Trimble was taken ill. The friends whom he had been expecting to visit him were notified not to come, and it was decided that we could not have our picnic.

"It is a most inconvenient time for Elihu to be sick," mumbled Cousin Calista crossly, as she and Aunt Apphia and I were sitting in the east room just before dinner. "How are Mr. Holly and Mr. Perrine going to know that we shall not have the picnic?"

Aunt Apphia was darning a table-cloth in a most elaborate manner, and, almost without seeming to hear, she answered, "I don't know, I'm sure."

"If those friends of his hadn't happened to live in a diametrically different direction," Cousin Calista mumbled on, "then Ben Trimble could have stopped on his way and told the

young men in Hickory. But they will come down here—and then we can't have our picnic." Ben Trimble was Elihu's younger brother, a boy of sixteen, who had taken a stage that morning in order to inform the expected visitors in person of Elihu's condition.

"No," commented Aunt Apphia. "Elihu is too sick. Leah would not go,—and that would spoil everything."

"Is he going to die?" I asked, very much frightened by her tone.

"Oh, mercy, no!" cried Cousin Calista.

"But he had to take blue pill and Dovers' powders,—I heard Aunt Leah say so," I insisted stoutly.

"It does sound enough to kill him," laughed Cousin Calista, "but let us hope for the best. What a child you are! But, come, Affie, don't you think somebody ought to go up to Hickory and tell the young men that we are not going to have the picnic?"

"No," replied Aunt Apphia emphatically.

"Why?—they won't like to take that long ride just for nothing."

"It won't hurt them, I fancy," rejoined Aunt Apphia heartlessly. "I don't think they are seriously overworked."

"I suppose you think you can entertain them, if they do come?"

"If I can't, there are enough others who can." Aunt Apphia's temper was well in hand.

"Poor Leah has been crying most of the morning," remarked Cousin Calista, seeing that Aunt Apphia was not exactly in a teasable mood.

"She is always frightened to death if Elihu doesn't look just so, you know," said Aunt Apphia. "He is evidently pretty sick,—but he will be all right in a few days, I have no doubt."

"In the meantime, I think some word ought to be sent to the young men in Hickory," persisted Cousin Calista. "If we don't let them know," she added artfully, "it will look as if we thought it was a good chance to have a visit again with them all by ourselves."

"What if they do?" asked Aunt Apphia disdainfully. "Neither father nor Josiah can possibly go to-day, and we certainly can't afford to hire anybody else. As I said, I don't see how it will hurt them to come down and find we are not going to have the picnic. Mother will ask them to sup with us quietly

at home,—and then they will go back again. The king of France and forty thousand men rode up the hill and then rode down again, and so can our friends from Hickory."

"I think they will be pretty 'mad' with us for not letting them know."

"If they are foolish enough to be that," commented Aunt Apphia severely, "let them. It would be just as well all around, perhaps."

She tossed her head with considerable spirit, and devoted herself more assiduously than ever to her darning.

"I think," went on Cousin Calista cautiously, after weighing Aunt Apphia's words for a moment,—"I think the only polite way to do is to send word to them. If there is anybody on earth that we ought to be polite to, it is those young men." Cousin Calista's air was one of strenuous and unflinching virtue. "I think it is frightfully rude to allow them to come down here without making an effort to let them know. You and I—now it would be perfectly proper,—don't look at me that way,—we could ride up there,—you on Tansy, and I on Lady Jane,——"

Lady Jane was Cousin Calista's own pony, a beautiful gray mare, gentle and fleet.

"Calista Summers,—what do you mean?" demanded Aunt Apphia, more frankly angry than I had ever before seen her. "You must be crazy. I tell you, it will do no harm to let them come down here,—and then explain how we were situated. You had better not tell my father what you suggested to me just now."

"Oh,—he wouldn't look at it as you do!—Calm yourself, Affie. It is you who are going crazy. I tell you it is the only thing to do."

Aunt Apphia simply gazed at her with thunder and lightning in her clouded hazel eyes; but the lawless young arch-conspirator pouted and nodded, and was evidently in a mood to do almost anything.

"It wouldn't do any harm for me to go all alone," she flung forth, after a moment's pause.

"Oh, no,—no harm, perhaps," commented Aunt Apphia cuttingly. "The only result might be that they would despise you to your dying day,—and possibly all the rest of us."

"I think they would like us all the better," persisted Cousin Calista obstinately.

There were no tramps about Birchmont in those days,—no railroads,—none of those modern developments and inventions which

have now made every corner of the globe a possible lurking-place for the horrible aftermath of degeneracy which forever pursues advanced civilization. So far, Cousin Calista was right. On her beautiful Lady Jane she could probably go safely anywhere she chose. Only the proprieties would be outraged,—and she was just now in no mood to care for them. Her pretty, brazen face was red with passion. She was angry to be cheated out of the picnic. She knew, also, that if Aunt Apphia's plan were carried out, there would be no chance for the private, personal little interviews to which she had been looking forward. The family would be all together in the parlor, as usual,—the conversation would be general,—and, though she might play never so entrancingly on her harp, and though she might toss off a sparkling witticism with every breath, she would have none of the individual incense for which her soul was longing. Aunt Apphia and Aunt Jerry and the others would be there,—and the attention of the guests would have to be divided with them. Cousin Calista knew only too well what this meant.

"Perhaps Jerry will go with me," pursued Cousin Calista, shaking her pretty yellow

curls over her face, and looking through them at Aunt Apphia, with her eyes narrowed, and very malicious in expression.

"Calista!" cried Aunt Apphia.

"Yes," went on Cousin Calista, deliberately. "All we shall do will be to canter briskly up there,—it won't take more than two hours,—leave the word,—perhaps with Jed Sears or his wife,—very likely we sha'n't see the young men at all,——"

"Very likely," murmured Aunt Apphia, sarcastically.

"And then ride home again," finished Cousin Calista, as though she were making the most reasonable proposition in the world.

"If you are really set on sending them word," began Aunt Apphia, finding her voice with difficulty, and then having all that she could do to control it, "hire some farm-boy in the neighborhood. If you do not care to pay him, I will gladly pay him myself. I could not believe that you were in earnest in this matter when you first spoke of it, but since you really seem to be, let me say, once for all, Calista Summers, that I would rather see my sister Jerry dead than riding off on any such immodest and silly expedition,—and

I believe she would rather die herself than do it. Even if the young men should honestly like you now,—and I think they do like you, —they would never wish to see you again, if you should ride up to their place as you suggest. Why, Calista,—are you possessed? They will think that you are,—and my father, —he will think,—what will he think, Calista?"

I did not know then the familiar proverb concerning those whom the gods would destroy, but it would have applied to the case.

Cousin Calista's hot face changed a little at the mention of my grandfather.

"Don't you say anything to him about it, Affie,—now, don't you!" she cried, almost bursting into tears. "You are deep, Apphia Wells! It is your name, and it is your nature,—and you think you can down me in this just as you have downed me time and time again, before now! But you sha'n't,—you sha'n't do it! I will show you that I can break webs,—even if you can spin them better than I can. You think you can throw me off the track by flinging up 'propriety' to me,— just as if I care for that. Do you believe there is anybody in this mean little town who

would dare to say a word against me? I tell you, I am above and beyond all that sort of thing,—and you know it. All you want is just to take everything for yourself,—and cut me out of everything—and——"

"Calista!" broke in Aunt Apphia, "don't have such a scene as this before the child,—don't! Oh, how can you, Calista?"

She began to sob under the fierce lashings of that waspish and unbridled tongue, and for a moment Cousin Calista kept silence. Presently Aunt Apphia rallied enough to say, brokenly, "Well,—I have said all that I can. I suppose you will do as you please?"

"That I shall," retorted Cousin Calista sullenly. "And whatever I do, Affie,—don't you tell what I have said,—now you must promise."

"Indeed, I shall make no promises whatever," declared Aunt Apphia with spirit.

She renewed her labors upon the old tablecloth, and just then my grandfather, placid and beaming as usual, entered and began to look over his papers on the table. He observed nothing out of the common, and presently Shannah came to the door and announced dinner.

The rest started at once for the dining-room, talking briskly, but I lingered behind with Aunt Apphia, while she was folding up her work. My little soul was boiling with resentment.

"I hate Cousin Calista!" I whispered to her fiercely. "I just hate her."

"Stop, stop!" she whispered back to me. "Don't you say such a thing,—and never, never, Barbara, repeat what we have said this morning. Promise me."

I promised, and never during all of those stirring days that followed, nor during the long years since, did I reveal the story of that quarrel which showed so much of Cousin Calista's soul to Aunt Apphia and to me.

"But I hate her just the same," I insisted. "She killed Mr. Lyman Baker."

Aunt Apphia gave a little shriek.

"Who under the sun told you that?" she demanded.

I was a little alarmed at what I had said, and would not reply.

"I wonder if it could have been Shannah who told you that?" she mused, looking at me sharply.

I was still uncommunicative. I would not for worlds have betrayed that faithful soul.

"What could she have meant?" Aunt Aphia stopped to meditate aloud, in spite of the fact that they were all sitting at the table, and grandfather was waiting to say grace.

"She did kill him," I persisted darkly, "and she will kill somebody else the first you know."

"Do you never say such a thing as that again, Barbara!" she whispered, shaking me until I almost cried. "Cousin Calista could not do such a terrible thing,—she could not, you naughty girl!"

"She told him lies,—and it broke his heart, and killed him," I persisted, weeping now outright.

"Oh,—that is what you mean, you queer child!" she said in a relieved way. "Well, —I suppose some of the neighbors told you that. I wish they would hold their tongues. You mustn't let them tell you such things. Who could it have been?"

But grandfather called us sternly at just that moment,—and so many things happened

during the next day or two that Aunt Apphia never again recurred to the subject.

Cousin Calista said not a word during the serving of the dinner. In an incredibly short time she had finished eating, and excused herself. Then she went out into the kitchen, where she held a brief interview with Josiah and Shannah. Presently she came in again, in her light green riding habit, with her green hat to match, its two long white feathers trailing down over her hair. She was always picturesque, and possessed, more than any of my aunts, the indefinable but magic quality of "style." In this garb she was positively handsome.

"Oh, are you going to ride, my dear?" said my confiding grandfather, regarding her fondly. "Going all alone?"

"Yes, unless one of the girls will go with me. Apphia says she won't"—poutingly—"and Leah is too distracted, I suppose, over poor Elihu,—and——"

"Not I," declared Aunt Jerry cheerfully munching an apple turnover. "I've got something else to do, Miss Ladybird."

Aunt Apphia's worried look lightened a little.

"I wish I could go," said Aunt Leah affectionately, and looking reproachfully toward Aunt Jerry.

"Oh, but then she couldn't run down the road every fifteen minutes and inquire how her tootsy-wootsy Elihu is," giggled Aunt Jerry.

"Jerusha," reproved grandmother, "you do not seem to realize that Elihu is a very sick boy."

Aunt Leah looked as if she did not like the word "boy," just there, but Cousin Calista cut short the discussion with a curt, "Well,—good-by."

"Oh, I wouldn't go, Calista,—not far,—and you'd better go down the river," wailed Aunt Apphia, her face white with a pallor which the others could not understand.

"Thank you,—I think I shall take quite a ride. Lady Jane hasn't been out for two days, and she needs exercise. I don't know when you will see me again."

Cousin Calista sailed airily out of the room, with her white feathers floating around her head. Some of us rushed to the window to see her start off. She made Josiah hold out his hand, as she had taught him to do, and

then she put her foot into it, and vaulted easily into her handsome saddle. An instant afterward Lady Jane's feet cantered off across the bridge. Cousin Calista was headed for Hickory, and she rode with the manner of one possessed, as Aunt Apphia had said she talked.

After she had sewed an hour or more beside the east window that afternoon, Aunt Apphia took my hand and we strolled together out into the garden. She had lingered longer than usual after dinner, over her simple toilet, and I could see, though the others, not knowing what I knew, did not seem to remark anything out of the common, that she was perfectly wretched. We began to pull weeds here and there, and to cut away the few faded flowers. Grandmother was working again in the attic with Shannah to help her. Grandfather had just started for the county town, expecting to be gone several days. Court would open the next morning, and he had some cases coming on.

Presently Aunt Jerry followed us. She, too, began to pull weeds, and to straighten and tie up the plants. For a long time none of us said anything. Then Aunt Apphia

asked suddenly, "Jerry, did she really urge you to go with her?"

Aunt Jerry understood who was meant, though she seemed to wonder at the question.

"No," she answered promptly. Then she added, after a moment's thought, "Do you know where she has gone?"

"N-no," replied Aunt Apphia, hesitatingly, "but I can guess."

"So can I," rejoined Aunt Jerry smartly; "only,—she can't be such a goose, Affie!"

"It would be worse than being a goose."

"A thousand times!" cried Aunt Jerry poignantly. "What will they think of all of us?"

After a little, we left the garden and strolled into the orchard, which extended back of the house and down to the river. It was a cloudy afternoon, with a fresh, fitful wind blowing. To this hour I have a nervous, uncomfortable feeling, such as I had on that day—afterward a marked one forever in my calendar,—whenever the weather is like that. For awhile we sat on a big rock in the river. It was known in the family as the Sucker Rock, and great droves of suckers were forever lounging around and under it. In order

to reach it, we had to jump across a good many stepping-stones, to the imminent danger of our pretty kid shoes and openwork stockings, but I was the only one who really wet my feet. I did not mind it. We were all of us glad to have something to make us forget the thing which was most on our minds. It was delightful at last to hear the tea-bell ringing, up at the end of the garden, and to know that the long afternoon was past.

We hurried silently through the orchard, and found Aunt Leah waiting for us there. She had just come from the Trimbles', and reported that Elihu's fever was lower and the doctor said that, if he should have a good night, he would be well soon.

"Hasn't Calista come?" asked Aunt Apphia, hardly able to wait until Aunt Leah finished her long exposition of Elihu's case.

"Oh, no. I hadn't thought of that. It is time she was home, sure enough."

"I should think it was," remarked Aunt Apphia grimly. "However," she added, just as we entered the door, "don't show any anxiety before mother."

We should have known enough not to do that as soon as we saw grandmother, who fell

into a state almost of hysterics when she found that none of us had any tidings of Cousin Calista. Neither she nor any of my aunts had ever been gone alone so long as this. Aunt Apphia tried to laugh away grandmother's perturbation, and we began to talk in the liveliest possible strain in order to divert her mind.

One of our neighbors had bought a lot of wood for good, dry fireplace wood, and it had turned out to be green all through.

"But I managed it," she had said to Aunt Jerry, as that vivacious maiden now related.

"What did she do?" inquired grandmother.

"You never could guess," laughed Aunt Jerry. "She had a lot of bad butter. She had intended to throw this away, but, instead, she used it to butter the logs, and they blazed up fiercely. Did you ever hear of such an idea?"

Grandmother was much amused, but not enough so to forget Cousin Calista.

"Hark!" she cried. "Doesn't that sound like Lady Jane coming across the bridge!"

"Oh, mercy, no. That is Mr. Dart's old Betsey. Calista wouldn't thank you for ma-

king such a mistake as that. She will be coming presently. I heard of something over at Mr. Dart's which will interest you, mother. You know Shannah says we never can get rid of those mice. Our cat doesn't make the least impression on them, but what do you think he keeps?"

"Two cats?" suggested grandmother.

"Not at all. He keeps—a chipmunk,—and the chipmunk catches ever so many mice. Mr. Dart has seen it dragging them away,—and they have no trouble any more with mice. We positively must keep a chipmunk."

Even the thought of getting rid of the mice, and all of Aunt Jerry's fun, could not long divert grandmother's mind from the disquiet which was consuming it.

"Oh," she broke out, even while the word, "chipmunk," lingered on Aunt Jerry's lips, "what can have happened to Calista?"

IX

A SENSATION

"—Untaught in youth my heart to tame,
My springs of life were poisoned."

Lord Byron.

CHAPTER IX

A Sensation

AFTER supper, grandmother insisted that Josiah should go in search of the missing girl, and he started obediently for the barn to harness Tansy. Grandmother took her seat in the front doorway. There was no piazza upon our old-fashioned colonial house. Aunt Apphia and I stood at the gate, while across the bridge, as far off as we could see, Aunt Jerry and Aunt Leah were strolling slowly back and forth. We watched Josiah ride up to and past them. Then they walked quite back to us,—and again off to the other end of the street. The whole family were nervous, and all the more because of grandfather's absence.

Suddenly, in the distant dimness of the gathering twilight, Aunt Apphia, whose sight was like a hawk's, saw a gay cavalcade approaching, and gave a relieved little scream. Grandmother, who had been so much overcome that she had finally retreated to the

couch in the east room, heard the joyful sound and came running out to the gate, with her pretty cap on awry, her vanity quite lost in her concern.

On came the cavalcade. We could presently discern that it consisted of two men and a woman. Then we could make out the flowing outlines of Cousin Calista's white feathers, and could hear the sound of merry voices.

"Calista doesn't act as if she felt very bad at giving us such a fright," murmured poor grandmother, in a tone of grieved reproach. Then she added repentantly, "Of course, she didn't mean to." She was very fond of Cousin Calista, who, indeed, petted grandmother more, perhaps, than did any one of my aunts.

"You stay here, Barbara," whispered Aunt Apphia, when it became certain that this was Cousin Calista, with the two young men from Hickory, and that all was well with them; "I have a headache, and I shall go up-stairs. Don't let them send for me,—for I shall not come down."

For once, I let her flit away without following her. I was all a-tremble with the ex-

citement of Cousin Calista's return, and with the thought of seeing the interesting young men from Hickory; and in the hubbub none of the family remarked Aunt Apphia's absence. Shannah began to light the lamps and candles, while the rest of us flocked out around the new-comers, everybody talking at once. Mr. Perrine,—I noticed particularly that it was Mr. Perrine,—threw himself from his horse first, and helped Cousin Calista to dismount. Then, all chattering briskly, and Cousin Calista especially merry and radiant, they trailed into the parlor, where they talked on until Shannah summoned them into the dining-room, where grandmother and she had furnished forth considerably more than "a trifling, foolish banquet."

"How did you happen to think of such a wild scheme as going up to the mine, Calista?" inquired grandmother rather sternly.

"I didn't go to the mine," pouted Cousin Calista. "I rode only a little way up the Witch Brook road,—you know we have never been up that road,—and I was only going up to Mr. Sears's farm-house, anyway, just to leave word about the picnic,—when all of a

sudden I saw two dashing young men approaching,—and they insisted upon accompanying me home."

"We could not think of letting her start back without something to eat," explained George Holly seriously. "I left her in the care of Dick, here, while I went to see what I could find at our farmhouse in the shape of sandwiches and so on. I thought I should never get anything together there. Mrs. Sears is embarrassed when she is requested to hurry,—especially when her resources are not quite adequate to the demand. I am afraid our delay caused you some worry,—and, after all, I brought back a slender supper,—and what there was of it wasn't very good."

"It was delicious," declared Cousin Calista.

"It was mere sawdust beside this ambrosia and nectar," insisted George Holly.

"I showed my appreciation by eating it all," asserted Cousin Calista. "Why, what is the matter with you, Shannah? You look as if you had had a fit of sickness."

Shannah, as might have been expected from one of her excitable nature, had taken Cousin Calista's adventure very hard.

"Oh, Miss Calista!" she burst forth now, in a tone of heartfelt relief; "I've been that worrited about you that I couldn't get the better of it. Even now you're home, I can't get the better of it,—I am very physical, as you know, Miss Calista,—as physical as most,—but indade it makes me faint at my heart-like."

"How foolish you are, Shannah!" laughed Cousin Calista, still in the highest of spirits. "And you knew that I was on Lady Jane, too,—the surest-footed horse in the county, I'll wager. You act as if I didn't know how to ride, Shannah."

"Oh, everybody knows there are no young ladies for riding like ours, in all the land," admitted Shannah, proudly; "but since Tansy was thot venomous last month, Miss Calista, almost anything might happen."

"That's so, Shannah," laughed Cousin Calista. Poor Shannah left the room with a comfortable feeling of having vindicated her claim to intellectuality by the use of so many big words, and they all fell to talking of other things.

I had noticed, and I fancied that grandmother had observed it also, that George

Holly had been sober and quiet all the evening. He seemed to be looking around him uneasily. I remembered the heroine with the bronze lights in her hair, and I felt sure that he would inquire soon for Aunt Apphia.

"You have added to our already heavy debt by your kindness to Calista," began grandmother, who sat next him. "She evidently set forth without any clear idea of where she was going. We were all greatly excited by Elihu's sudden attack, and the changes which that entailed,—and none of the girls seemed quite like herself."

Poor grandmother hardly knew what to say. She felt as if Cousin Calista's conduct required an apology of some sort, yet she did not like to imply that that self-willed maiden had committed an indiscretion. George Holly simply passed the matter by without comment, and took up another theme.

"Oh, it was of no consequence,—only a pleasure, indeed. You say that the girls all feel not quite like themselves," he repeated. "I hope Miss Apphia is not ill?"

"Why, no. Isn't she here?" Grandmother peered around the table vaguely.

"She has got a headache," I reported glibly.

Then I added gratuitously, "It made her sick to worry so," and looked darkly toward Cousin Calista.

The young man could not help smiling at the fierceness of my glance, but he continued his conversation with my grandmother.

"Miss Wells seems to be very delicate?"

"Delicate?" repeated grandmother, in a surprised way. "We have never called her delicate. We think she is pretty strong,—stronger than most of us. She has never been really ill in her life. Perhaps she has been more nervous than usual, since the runaway."

"Yes, it is too bad that such a thing should have happened,—and yet if it had not, we might never have known you all."

As they talked and laughed on, I began to grow sleepy, and to long for my dear Aunt Apphia. I slipped down from my seat, put my arm around grandmother's neck, gave her a good-night kiss, and was about to go away quietly, when George Holly laid a detaining hand upon me and drew my unresisting little form upon his lap and kissed my forehead.

"Will you take a message from me to your Aunt Apphia?" he whispered into my ear.

"Yes," I whispered joyously back to him.

"Tell her that I missed her very much," he whispered; "very much. Now, can you remember that?"

I nodded to him, with a wicked sense of triumph in my heart, and I am sure my eyes were glowing when, after holding me tightly for a moment, he set me carefully down and I ran up-stairs to deliver my precious message to Aunt Apphia.

I found her lying in the dark, fully dressed. My candle disclosed traces of tears on her cheeks, and showed that her beautiful ringlets were rough and disordered. My jubilant mood seemed to strike jarringly upon her, as she rose and began to prepare for the night.

"What made you cry, auntie?" I asked her timidly. "You were glad to have Cousin Calista come back, weren't you?"

"Glad! It seems as if I never were gladder of anything in my life," she answered fervently.

"And I don't think they were very despising, the way you said," I continued comfortingly.

Aunt Apphia fell to laughing softly, and caught me up in her arms as she sat on the

bed, covering me with the soft auburn cloud of her unbound hair.

"Then, why did you cry?" I persisted.

"Oh, I couldn't explain, darling," she told me. I tried to work out the problem for myself; but in the light of Mr. Holly's beautiful message and all the other blessings of the day, I could not solve it.

After we had put out the light, we heard the young men canter off across the bridge, and presently Aunt Jerry came up to bed. I wanted to ask her what they had talked about after I came away, but Aunt Apphia had bidden me keep perfectly still, and long before Aunt Jerry had finished her always elaborate preparations to retire, I was fast asleep.

The next morning I was up early. I remember that Aunt Apphia and I worked for an hour or more before breakfast in the garden. Breakfast was late, for grandfather had found out that his cases were not coming on for a week or more, and had unexpectedly arrived in the night. He was very tired, and had decided not to get up at the usual time. Cousin Calista naturally preferred also to rest later than usual. The house was very still when we went out. Shannah, heavy-

eyed and with a shuffling step, was building the kitchen fire. Everything was calm, but it was the calm which precedes the tempest.

Suddenly, while Aunt Apphia and I were raking up the little piles of weeds which we had accumulated, we heard a strange hubbub in the kitchen. There was a buzzing as of a million bees; then there were shouts of a more or less shocked yet muffled character. Then we heard Shannah groaning.

We stopped and listened for an instant. Then, without a word, Aunt Apphia dropped her rake and rushed toward the house. I followed on after her.

"What is it? What is it?" she cried wildly, as we burst in at the door.

"Oh, rest his sowl! The poor old man! Such a quare, poor old man! An' who could have done it—such a venomous thing! Oh, it is la*ment*able! An' his gray hair was all bedabbled with blood, was it? An' did somebody shoot him wid a pistol, I'm wonderin'! I gollies! Lord save us!"

Shannah sank into a chair, and, after the manner of her kind, threw her apron over her head, while she was in the midst of her apostrophe. As she sat down, she dropped

the knife and fork with which she was just about to turn an omelet. This was now in imminent danger of burning.

Grandmother, who had been standing like a marble image in the doorway opposite us, hurried forward, picked up the knife and fork, wiped them methodically on a towel which hung on a line above her head, and turned the omelet properly. It was not until then that she seemed able to speak, and even then she looked at us in a blind and helpless way, and could only murmur, "Oh! Oh! It is too terrible to tell."

"Shannah!" demanded Aunt Apphia, shaking her by the shoulder, "You must tell me! Whose gray hair? What do you mean?"

She pulled Shannah's apron from before that agitated maiden's stained and working features, and she, opening her mouth obediently, tried to speak; but her tongue by this time could only burr vehemently. She could not utter a coherent word.

We heard Aunt Jerry coming like a whirlwind through the house.

"She will tell us!" gasped Aunt Apphia, and as that energetic damsel appeared in the

doorway, followed closely by Cousin Calista and Aunt Leah in various stages of *déshabille,* Aunt Apphia sank into a chair, caught me in her arms, and held me tight, while Aunt Jerry, quite enjoying her rôle as sensation-monger, poured forth the whole story.

"Why, haven't you heard, Affie? Not a word? Oh, mercy, everybody in town knows it by this time? Poor old Uncle Ezra Parkins! Somebody murdered him—murdered him—just think of it! right up there on the Witch Brook road—on the road to the mine—this morning or last night. Mr. Eli Lathers found the body on his way down to market this morning about five o'clock. It seems he lives in the first house after you turn off that road. It is in the town of Birchmont, he says. The Hickory line runs through his farm. Just think, a murder in Birchmont! Mother says there has never been such a thing since she was born. Oh, I do wish father would get up!"

"Did somebody shoot him?" asked Aunt Apphia, wide-eyed and trembling.

"Who told you?" gurgled Aunt Leah between chattering teeth.

"Have they found the murderer?" de-

manded Cousin Calista, shuddering like the rest of us.

"Such a blot on the fair fame of our town!" murmured grandmother, who only, in the general paralysis, retained presence of mind enough to take up the omelet, which she was now preparing, alone and unaided, to carry into the dining-room. "Really, girls, you must get ready for breakfast. Shannah has made a fine shortcake, and here is this great omelet. Shannah, you must control yourself and bring in the coffee."

"Mercy! Who wants any breakfast?" wailed Aunt Leah. "I'm afraid this will just about kill Elihu. I am going down there as soon as I can and see what sort of a night he has had."

"Just as likely as not it may brace him right up and cure him," suggested Cousin Calista comfortingly.

"Try to talk of cheerful things at breakfast," counseled grandmother. "I hear your father coming. You know how particular he is about such matters."

"Oh, we must know all that Jerry heard!" insisted Cousin Calista.

It seemed that Mr. Duncan Dart had passed

the house while Aunt Jerry—lucky mortal, in Cousin Calista's opinion—had been sweeping off the front steps. He had stopped and told her the news. He said—all this was told after grandfather had entered the room, but before we had any of us tasted a mouthful of the good breakfast which was smoking itself away before us—that he had himself just seen Eli Lathers, who had sent several of the neighbors up to the Witch Brook road to view the body, before Mr. Trimble, who was the coroner, should order it removed. Dr. Bates, among others, had gone. Mr. Lathers said the old man looked as though somebody had killed him with a blow on the head, for his hair was full of blood and sand.

"Now I have something to tell you," said Cousin Calista, trying to speak lightly, though her pale face showed that she was deeply moved. "I saw that old man up there yesterday. He was standing on the bridge over Witch Brook. Mr. Perrine says they call it Merrill's Bridge because a man named Gad Merrill owns the farm the brook runs through just there. I said to him, 'Aren't you a long way from home, Uncle Ezra?' And he said,

'I'm lookin' for sympathy, Miss Calista. That's all I want, a little mite o' sympathy.' And I said, 'Well, you have mine,' and I gave him a piece of silver, I was so sorry for him! You ought to have heard him thank me. And then he said, just as he is always saying, you know, 'It's a cold, cruel world, Miss Calista —cold and cruel—but the proud and haughty shall be brought low—that's what the Good Book says, Miss Calista. Better be humble—be humble—for the proud and haughty shall be brought low'—and he was mumbling that over and over as far off as I could hear him."

"Did you see him at all on your way back?" asked my grandfather anxiously.

"No—o," replied Cousin Calista confusedly. It had suddenly occurred to her that possibly grandfather had not heard of her eccentric trip to Hickory. "No—o," she repeated, pulling herself together, "I was with Mr. Holly and Mr. Perrine—and we were laughing and talking—but we should have seen—anything —I am sure."

"Who were last known to pass over the road?" demanded grandfather.

"That's a very disagreeable part of it,"

said Aunt Jerry. "Mr. Dart said to me, 'Those young fellows who are working a mine on Jed Sears's place was down to your house last night, wasn't they?' And of course, I had to say they were. He asked me when they started for home—and I had to say that it must have been about ten o'clock. And he said that along in the night,—he should say it was after midnight—Eli Lathers had heard them pass his house, he was pretty sure. Somebody went by on horseback—two or three men—and they were laughing and talking. Mr. Lathers doesn't like them very well, I fancy," added Aunt Jerry. "I didn't like the way Mr. Dart said he spoke of them,—not at all."

My grandfather looked pale and sober. He instructed us, as grandmother had done, to talk about other things, and we made some sort of a breakfast, and then had family prayers, as usual. When grandfather came to the familiar petition about putting our hands to our mouths and our mouths in the dust, it seemed to me I had never fully understood it before, and that, for the first time, we were all of us really in that attitude before the Almighty.

When he had straightened up the inverted chair before him, and looked at a letter which had arrived the day before, grandfather went out.

"You will come back as soon as you hear anything, won't you, father?" Aunt Apphia asked him. She had been out in the garden again, and her hands were full of gay flowers, but her cheeks were as white as chalk.

"Yes. I may go up to the place."

"Do you think it looks very—very—bad—for—them, father?" she faltered, as though she could not bear to voice the suspicion in her soul.

"If their tracks were the last over the road—yes," answered grandfather slowly. "They are not very popular with their neighbors, I fancy. We country people do not cotton readily to outsiders, especially if they belong to a different class from ourselves, and do not take pains to conceal the fact that they know it, and seem to consider themselves above us."

As he spoke, there came before me—and all the family confessed later that it had come before their minds also—a picture of George Holly, as he had stood out by the post on that day when Uncle Ezra had lifted the white

horse's foot—the young man's haughty air—the old imbecile scowling and shaking his fist, and the gaping knot of villagers looking on and listening.

X

A MYSTERIOUS IGNORANCE

"—the sky, which noticed all, made no disclosure,
And the earth kept up her terrible composure."

Robert Browning.

CHAPTER X

A Mysterious Ignorance

IT was long after noon when grandfather returned. He had really been to the scene of the tragedy, a half-mile or so up the Witch Brook road from the point where it diverged from the main highway along the river.

The rest of us had scarcely spoken a word during his absence. Aunt Leah had been down to see Elihu and had found that, with rare good judgment on the part of the family, he had not yet been told of the terrible event which had so completely upset us all. He had passed a good night, his fever was gone, and the doctor said that by a week more he would probably be about again. My aunts and Cousin Calista, who divided the lighter household duties systematically among themselves, arranged the east room and the parlor even more perfectly than ever, and instituted absolute order in every chamber in the house—and then we sat and waited breathlessly for

grandfather to come home. Cousin Calista suggested a trip to the village store for a spool of silk or some other equally unnecessary merchandise; but grandmother, who had not been a lawyer's wife thirty-five years for nothing, forbade her to leave the house.

"None of you had better go anywhere until Mr. Wells comes home and tells you just what to say and do," she directed. "This is a serious business—and one careless word may have grave results."

This scared us all, and especially me. I clung closer than ever to Aunt Apphia, and a nameless terror seemed to be rising higher and higher in my breast—like a flood which was going presently to drown me. I felt half smothered.

Elihu Trimble's father was the coroner. He had a swift horse and a light buggy, and he had invited grandfather to drive up to Merrill's Bridge with him.

Grandfather looked years older than when he had started away. He sank heavily into the chair in front of the writing-table, and laid his hat abstractedly down on the mass of papers lying there. For a moment he seemed unequal to saying anything.

Then he told us how far he had been and how he came to go, but that was all.

"What—what—did you find out?" stammered Aunt Apphia.

"Oh, no more—not much more"—grandfather corrected himself—"than Mr. Dart told Jerusha this morning. It seems that Mr. Lathers's son whom he had sent back to his house to tell his family—the Lathers place is a half-mile or so, they tell me, from the spot where old Uncle Ezra was found—this son moved the body somewhat. You remember that the old man had a great deal of bushy gray hair. His hair is full of sand and blood. The place beside the road where he was lying is very sandy. There was a bottle of cider-brandy, nearly empty, in his pocket. He had apparently been drinking, and had lain down to sleep beside the road. There either somebody struck him—or stepped on him—or—"

Grandfather paused. He was probably thinking—and the thought seemed to fly into the minds of all of us—of the two careless young men riding home in the dark—then a crunch—perhaps a horror-stricken cry—then a failure to report anything—dark suspicions of a criminally light valuation of a

human life, or worse—and then the enmity of the neighbors. I could not possibly have realized all this at that time as I did in after years, but an intuition of it seemed to penetrate my soul, just as the keener knowledge of the affair in all its bearings sank into the consciousness of my grandfather's family; and we all shook with the terror of it.

Later, rumors of every description were flying around the village. We heeded grandfather's advice and kept closely at home, spending our time largely in the garden and orchard. There was to be a coroner's inquest on Saturday—the next day but one. Then the main facts would be brought out, and we should know certainly whether anybody was to be arrested for the murder.

That night few people in town slept at all. It is impossible to realize at this time in the world what such an event as poor old Uncle Ezra's murder was then to the dwellers in that isolated and peaceful community. It was attended with a horror and mystery which lasted through years—long after most of the actors in the little drama had passed from the stage.

But something which at the time startled

us almost as much as the first news of the crime itself occurred the next morning.

We had all arisen early, nervous and unrefreshed, after the warm summer night. We had eaten our breakfast lifelessly, and all of the family were scattered about the house attending to their ordinary morning duties, when suddenly a familiar sound came in through the open windows. It was undoubtedly the pounding of the feet of two horses on the bridge. Grandmother was making currant jam and jelly, and Shannah, Aunt Aphia and I were helping her, but we all knew what was going to happen, even before the clang of the big brass knocker resounded through the house. Cousin Calista, who was as quick as a cat, was at the door before Shannah could so much as wash the currant-juice from her hands.

Even Cousin Calista's irrepressible spirits had been a good deal affected by the tragedy of which she had come so near to being a part, and she met our visitors with uncommon soberness. We heard Aunt Jerry and Aunt Leah join them, a little later, in the parlor, The doors were open quite through the house,

and only the dining-room and a short hall lay between us and them. Presently Aunt Leah rushed out and asked us if we were not coming in.

"I don't see how I can come," replied grandmother, looking around despairingly upon the heaps of currants.

"You will have to excuse us both," said Aunt Apphia, stemming away rapidly at the fruit in a great bowl in her lap.

I had been thinking the matter over and had decided that I would put on a clean apron and would go in with the others. Aunt Leah buttoned the apron for me, and presently we were sitting in our usual places in the parlor, making excuses for grandmother and Aunt Apphia.

The conversation was not lively. Everybody talked in a slightly subdued tone, and when we entered, it was easy to see that nothing had yet been said concerning the topic which occupied all of our minds. The weather had been under discussion, and Elihu's probably speedy recovery. I noticed —or thought I did—that Mr. George Holly's face fell a trifle when Aunt Leah said that Aunt Apphia was immersed, as it were, in

currant-juice, and must be excused—but everything else was absolutely commonplace. The tones of the young men, however, were as cheerful as ever, while ours were decidedly doleful.

"Very well, then," remarked Richard Perrine. "Everything seems to be favorable to our plan. We have been looking the ground over, and we think that, if Mr. Trimble improves as fast as you expect, you may all be able to visit our place by next week. We came down this morning on purpose to have you set a day. We wish to show the mine to you and a good many other things. It needs time here to get ready, we find, and we hope you will set a day at once. The weather is just right now for picnics. What do you say, Miss Jerry?"

(Cousin Calista flushed angrily. Why should he have appealed to Aunt Jerry instead of to her?)

Aunt Jerry's beautiful eyes seemed to cloud over with a sort of fear. She evidently did not notice the discrimination which had been instituted between her and Cousin Calista. She was thinking of something else. Aunt Leah paled a little, too. The thought of

merry-making fitted ill with the ghastly specters of the last few hours.

"Do—do—you think," began Aunt Jerry in confusion, "that—that we had better plan for any picnics—or parties of any sort just now?"

"Just now?" inquired George Holly, in a startled way. "Why not just now?"

"Why, all this that has happened has made us perfectly wretched, as you can understand. Mr. Trimble, of course, under the circumstances, feels it especially, and Elihu will, as soon as they tell him. He will have to be told to-morrow, but his room is in a distant part of the house and they have thought best as yet not to let him know anything about it."

"About it?" gasped Richard Perrine. "Really, it must be something that we ought to know, probably, but we do not. We did not know that anything sad had happened. I hope Mr. Trimble has not had trouble in his family."

Both of the young men were leaning forward in their chairs. Their faces were strained, and they were looking from one to

another of my aunts in apparently complete bewilderment.

Aunt Leah gave a little shriek.

"You don't know!" cried Cousin Calista.

"And you haven't heard of the—murder?" breathed Aunt Jerry, staring into their eyes, as if she were incapable of believing that such ignorance could exist.

"Murder!" they both ejaculated together.

There was an instant's pause. Then George Holly drew a long breath and said, "The idea of a murder is so utterly incongruous with this place that it seems even more shocking than it would in the city, or among different surroundings anywhere. I don't wonder that you do not feel like picnicking. You must pardon us."

"I hope it is not anybody whom you cared about," ventured Richard Perrine.

The cool impersonality of these words, the indubitable sincerity of their professions of ignorance, completed our stupefaction. These young men had, somehow or other, failed to hear anything concerning the tragedy which had occurred so near them. We could hardly credit the evidence of our own senses.

"Why—why—it happened yesterday morning before daylight," stammered Aunt Jerry, instinctively avoiding the details which would most startle her hearers.

"Not far from your house," added Cousin Calista.

"Who was it?" demanded George Holly, quickly.

"Old Uncle Ezra Parkins," she answered.

"That was the old man," explained Aunt Leah, with the faintest possible shade of reproach in her tone, "who lifted your horse's foot that day—don't you remember?"

"Oh—it was that poor old duffer, was it?" commented George Holly, with an air of relief. "Well—murder is an awful thing, but the community can better support the loss of an old idiot like him than of somebody who is of any use."

"Oh, but there are dreadful circumstances ——" began Aunt Jerry.

Both of the young men looked at her with eyes full of acute interest—but she paused and could not go on.

"I can't understand how you happened not to know!" breathed Cousin Calista.

"Why, it is simple enough," explained Richard Perrine. "Old Jed never goes to the village—nor anywhere else off his farm, if he can help it—except on Saturdays. We are a half-mile or more from the regular road—the Witch Brook road—as you will see when you come up there. Our house is in plain sight from that road—but we are perched on a hillside a full half-mile away from it. Men who happen to be going along the regular road can't call out to us, nor very conveniently stop to tell us anything. Then our mine is more than a mile back in the woods below the house. Thursday morning, we went off to the mine very early. Our men up there live in a shanty close by. Two of them are married. They live ten miles or more away—they are brothers; brothers by blood, and brothers in intellectual density; but they can handle a pick and shovel. They go home over Sunday. The others stay at the shanty all the while, unless they come down to the village of a Saturday night. We worked hard all day—you know we have a laboratory up there, a rude one, and this morning we thought we would come down and propose a picnic to you. We think your father and all

of you will be interested in some experiments which we—especially George here—have been making."

"It would be very nice," murmured Cousin Calista, "but Uncle Wells might say we oughtn't to go—just yet."

"It would seem a little shocking, don't you think?" added Aunt Leah. "Of course, this is a terrible thing for Birchmont. It happened right near the Hickory border—but still it was a Birchmont man, and it happened in Birchmont—and nothing like it was ever known here before. It has affected my father very much."

"Have they caught the murderer?" inquired George Holly.

"No—o," stammered Aunt Jerry.

The embarrassed consciousness of her manner could not fail to impress them. It was almost painful.

"Perhaps it is not known who did it. But somebody is usually suspected. How is it in this case?" inquired Richard Perrine, in an altered voice.

"No, nobody is suspected; not really suspected," answered Aunt Jerry, with agitated insistence.

"Not really suspected?" repeated he, slowly. "Is anybody even a little suspected?"

"Let me tell you all about it," began Cousin Calista, with decision. "You will have to hear about it soon, and we might as well tell you. Mr. Eli Lathers—you know him—was coming down to market early Thursday morning—it was about four o'clock—with his son, when he saw this heap of something lying beside the road. It is a shady place, but the bank is sandy. I noticed that place when I rode past it—and you must know it well. Gravel and sand for building have been dug from it, Uncle Wells says. It can't be half a mile from Merrill's Bridge. I know I met you that day not far from that spot. It was just before we reached Eli Lathers's place, you told me.

"Well," went on Cousin Calista, who dearly loved to be the center of interest, and who was now receiving that breathless attention which we all desire when we fall to story-telling: "Mr. Lathers rode right along, at first. Then he said it came over him that that was a queer-looking thing back there in the sand-heap, so he pulled up and went back to look

at it. Then he saw it was old Uncle Ezra, cold in death, and with his hair full of blood and sand. Mr. Lathers sent his son back to the house to tell the family there, and to get his other son to come and stay beside the body. He had told them not to touch it, but it seems that they did drag it further away from the road. They said they were afraid somebody might run over it."

"The old man had been drinking, probably," said George Holly, tentatively.

"Yes, he smelled strongly of liquor, and there was a bottle in his pocket, with a little cider-brandy in it."

"Dick," burst forth George Holly suddenly, "that old man must have been lying there when we rode home the other night from here. Don't you remember that I remarked, while we were riding in the shadow of those woods, that that thing beside the road looked like a man?"

"He must have been pretty much gone then," rejoined Richard Perrine, "for that thing never stirred—and I told you it looked to me more like a heap of stones. But now that I think of it, I remember that there never were any stones there."

"Perhaps he had been murdered even then," suggested George Holly, with a shudder. Neither one of the young men had grasped the fact that this affair was of vital interest to them.

At that instant quick steps sounded on the path, and my grandfather came swinging breathlessly in.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, almost awkwardly, and giving a start, as he saw that we had visitors, and who those visitors were. Then he paused, collected himself, and advanced to shake hands with them in his ordinary, self-possessed manner.

"I was just about to dispatch a messenger up to your place, gentlemen," he said in a rather worried tone. "The body of old Uncle Ezra was brought down yesterday afternoon, and deposited at his sister's. He has lived with his sister ever since he lost his wits. Dr. Bates, and the doctor from Hickory have examined the wound on his head. They say—well——" he paused and looked fixedly and sympathizingly into the faces of the two young men—"they don't just know what to say, it seems; but, anyway, there is to be coroner's inquest at the Town Hall to-mor-

row, and you are wanted as witnesses. Be seated, gentlemen. I don't see how you reached here without meeting us. Oh—it must have been while we were talking in the Lathers house."

As they sat down, George Holly remarked, with a little *hauteur* in his manner, "We shall take pains to be present. As we did not know anything about the whole matter until we rode down this morning, we can hardly hope to shed much light on the case, but——"

"What did you say? You didn't know anything about it till this morning?" demanded grandfather, in a stunned way.

"They hadn't heard a word, father!" cried Aunt Jerry, breathlessly. "They didn't even know there had been a murder."

"Then you have not heard, perhaps," said my grandfather, with the sort of sternness which a surgeon uses when he is probing for a bullet which must be found in order to save a life, "you may not have heard that the tracks of your horses were the latest ones which passed over the road on Thursday night. You are the persons who were last seen in the vicinity of the murder."

XI

A WORRIED HOUSEHOLD

"Thou deem'st thyself a king — poor, crazy elf!—
Chained to the wall of that cramped cell — thyself!"
From the wall of a Pompeian house.

CHAPTER XI

A Worried Household

THE faces of both of the young men underwent an almost distressing change. For a moment there was silence.

Then George Holly began: "No, we had not thought of the matter; we have only just heard of it, you know, and we have not yet grasped it in all its bearings. It is quite reasonable that our horses should have been the last known to have passed that place—for it must have been after midnight when we entered the Witch Brook road. It was after ten when we left your house here. We did not hurry. It was a fine night, and we enjoyed our ride."

Suddenly Cousin Calista began to cry.

"It was all my fault!" she sobbed brokenly. "You would never have got into this trouble if it had not been for me!"

My grandfather, who was sitting next to

her, drew her head over on his shoulder, with comforting words, while the young men hastened to reassure her—but in my soul I was raging and fuming. Yes, it was just as she said. If these dear young friends of ours were put into prison, it would be her fault. And how hard Aunt Apphia had tried not to have her go!

When she had regained her composure, though she was still a good deal shaken, George Holly turned to my grandfather and asked, "Though it is perfectly reasonable that people should think we might have been the last persons to pass over the road, still, I do not see how they could tell the tracks of our horses from any others."

"You will remember that old Uncle Ezra said that one of your horses had a defective shoe. Several of the village men were near by at the time when he lifted your horse's foot, and remarked the fault in the shoe. The print of a horse-shoe, with that very fault in it, is found clearly marked here and there along the road. The Lathers boys insist that it lay very near the body, when they first found it—but it is sandy there—and there had been a good deal of wind, and scores of tracks were

all around there in a confused jumble, probably."

"Yes; yes, sir," said George Holly, perfectly respectful, but evidently acutely annoyed. "Did they suggest that the man might have been killed by a blow from the foot of one of our horses?"

"That is one of the theories," admitted my grandfather, apparently relieved to have the whole matter laid bare. "Then, again, the doctors allow that the wound might have been caused by a blow of some club or other blunt implement. One side of the skull is quite crushed in."

"If it had been done by a horse, I should think the shape of the wound would show it," suggested Richard Perrine.

"It looks more like that than like anything else," said my grandfather. "But the old man had a very thick and shaggy head of hair, and he had apparently moved somewhat after he was hurt, for his head was half-buried in the sand. Why, it was a moonlight night; you must have been able to see as you rode along. You didn't happen to notice anything just there, did you?"

"Yes, I did," admitted George Holly. "I

am perfectly confident that neither one of us stepped on the old man, because I called my friend's attention to a black bunch of something lying on the sand a few feet from the road. I said, 'That looked like a man, back there,' but he insisted that it was merely a heap of brush or stones."

"That sounds promising," said my grandfather, more cheerfully than he had yet spoken. "I am glad you are so positive about that. Still, you are strangers, and you know strangers are not always treated as well as old neighbors."

"I think we are rather disliked by our Hickory fellow-citizens," laughed George Holly, a trifle bitterly. "We have never done anything to provoke their hostility, but, on the other hand, we have let them so severely alone that perhaps they have imagined that we have felt contempt for them. We treat them just as we are accustomed to treat those whom we casually meet in the city, but I imagine country people wish one to affect an interest in them, whether one really feels any or not. However, I don't see what difference it can make in this case how we are regarded by our

neighbors. The facts must stand for themselves."

My grandfather smiled a gray, worried sort of smile.

"I hope there will be no trouble," he said wearily. "I fortunately am not to preside at the inquest. My friend, 'Squire Wing, from the county town, has engaged to do that. Now it is too bad for you to go back to Hickory to-night," he continued hospitably. "I beg that you will spend the time here with us. In fact," he went on musingly, "you really ought to spend two days here. The funeral is to take place on Sunday afternoon, and, under the circumstances, you had better attend it. Don't you think so? Now, I beg you, gentlemen, to make my house your headquarters. Remain with us until Sunday night. Remember that I am a life-long resident here, and have the confidence of the people. It may —I should hope that it would—prevent invidious remarks, possibly ward off something worse, if you should be known to be stopping here."

George Holly sprang up and seized my grandfather's hand. He had seemed to take

all these strange disclosures with equanimity, but it was plain now that he had been more moved than he had cared to reveal.

"Thank you, thank you, Mr. Wells," he said, with feeling. "I can't tell you how we thank you. Your plan is a wise one, and it would be most agreeable, but Dick here will corroborate me when I say that our mining operations just now require our presence in Hickory. We will be back early in the morning, and remain for the funeral, and then——"

"We shall be most happy and grateful if you will let us take our dinners with you." Richard Perrine finished the sentence.

It was plain that the young men did not like to place themselves under such obligations to us as to stay with us during the whole of the two days which they were to spend in the village. My grandfather was able to recommend the Birchmont tavern, "The Two Oaks," and they rode off, promising to be back at nine o'clock the next morning. The inquest was set for ten.

As they bade us good-bye, they said, "There should, of course, be no picnics at present. It is no wonder that you were shocked. And

we do not see, any more than you, how we could have helped hearing about it all."

Richard Perrine added, in further apology (and possibly in order to give an edge to our appetite for the excursion to the mine, when it should be judged expedient), "You see, we begin to feel as though we were getting into your debt so deeply that we might never be able to show you adequately how much we appreciate all that you have done for us. We have some plans for our picnic which we hope will be something new to you —and as my father is an India merchant, we hope to have, when certain boxes arrive which have been sent for, a few little things to eat which will amuse you, even if you don't like them very well."

"Oh, how fine!" cried Cousin Calista, shaking her yellow curls.

I wondered privately if she had not made up on purpose all of her remorse for having been the means of getting our young miners into such a peck of trouble; but this was very mean in me. My grandfather cherished no such unworthy suspicion. As she spoke, he drew her to him, and passed his arm affectionately around her.

The last thing which was said, as the young men stood on the steps shaking hands with grandfather, was a low word by Mr. Holly, which showed how thoroughly he comprehended the situation.

"You do not consider, sir, that there is any danger of arrest for us?"

"I don't know," my grandfather answered, in a voice which grew hoarse and troubled as he went on. "You had better—well—be—not effusive and not on any account unduly talkative, but rather—well—pleasant—civil—to every one you meet. There is an idea on the part of some of our people that you hold yourselves—you will excuse me for speaking frankly—above us."

George Holly flushed, but thanked him respectfully. Richard Perrine flushed, too, all over his smooth-shaven face, and laughed, in a boyish way that he often had—and said, "You don't say so! Well, that is great!"

To tell the truth, it was not he, so much as his graver and prouder friend, who had offended our simple Birchmonters.

Grandmother and Aunt Apphia had heard through the half-open parlor door nearly every

word that had been said. When we came out, we found them pale and half-fainting.

"Father," began Aunt Apphia, in a strained and miserable voice, "what is the outlook? What do you think?"

He passed his arm around her and kissed her on the forehead. Aunt Jerry threw herself on the sofa and frankly burst into tears. I was by this time, seeing their wretchedness, sobbing drily and shaking with an unknown dread. I clung dumbly to Aunt Apphia's skirts.

"You don't think they could—they couldn't possibly arrest—there isn't any case—what do you think, Mr. Wells?" stammered grandmother.

"Even if they had stepped on that old idiot, I don't see what they could do about it—the law, I mean. They weren't to blame because he got drunk and went to sleep close by the road," cried Cousin Calista, harshly.

"But you know such things are sometimes done with malicious intent," grandfather reminded her. "If that could be proved——"

"Oh, but it couldn't be!" exclaimed Aunt Jerry.

"Why, they said they knew they didn't step on him," echoed Aunt Leah.

"They seem perfectly innocent," commented grandfather, with a sober and reproving calmness. "But you must remember that they have taken no pains to make friends here. Indeed, some of the people think they have tried to show how little they care for the opinion of Hickory and Birchmont,—though you and I know that is unjust. Still, their ways are not as our ways,—and you can readily see that those ways might be called supercilious and lordly by people whom they pass by with as little notice as though those others were, as the saying is, the dust beneath their feet. I find there is a very bitter feeling against them throughout the entire neighborhood. Indeed, Mr. Trimble says he has not heard a kind word said of them,—except by me."

There was a moment's silence. None of us had thought that things could be so bad.

"But if they had, either of them, stepped on—anything like that——" began Aunt Aphia, "they—they would surely know it."

There was a note of defiance in her tone.

"Sometimes," remarked my grandfather grimly, "men are in a condition, especially

late at night, when they do not know whether they step on things or not."

Aunt Apphia gave a little shriek.

"You don't imagine that they—they—drink, father?"

"I may not,—yet, after all, what do I know about their habits? Sometimes men's faces give no sign, even when they are drunkards. And again, even abstemious and temperate men occasionally take too much,—especially when they are off in the wilds and think nobody will know it."

"I shall never, never think that they were in such a condition that night that they did not know what they were doing," declared Aunt Apphia passionately.

"But certain others might," grandfather reminded her.

"Will such questions be raised at the inquest?" she inquired in distress.

"They certainly will."

"Oh, you will see 'Squire Wing beforehand,—and tell him all about them—won't you, father?" breathed Aunt Apphia. "Tell him how they saved Barbara's life,—and mine. You will, won't you?"

I thought that she was going to burst into

tears, but she did not. Aunt Jerry was doing the crying for the whole family. Now she looked up from her very moist pillow and demanded cogently, "Well,—what can they do,—what is the worst that they can do,—supposing they prove, or think they prove, that Mr. Holly or Mr. Perrine really did step on Uncle Ezra?"

"I haven't made sure," grandfather answered slowly. "The intention would count for a good deal. If anybody can prove that either of the young men felt any malice toward Uncle Ezra,—or that he had any motive for riding his horse over him,—why, it might go pretty hard with him."

A little later we all sat down to a sad and gloomy dinner. The currants proved to be the family salvation.

"It is folly for us to give up in this way," declared my grandmother, bustling about after our brief meal was over. "Here are piles and piles of beautiful fruit,—and we must get them put up. We virtually wasted the whole morning. If we all take hold together, we shall not any more than get them out of the way by supper-time. Jerry and Calista, you need not change your gowns. Put on your

large aprons and get this bowlful of currants stemmed as fast as possible."

The currants calmed us more effectually than anything else could possibly have done. The afternoon passed rapidly, and that night we all rested fairly well.

The day of the inquest I have heard called by "the oldest inhabitants," the most exciting in the history of the town of Birchmont. Surely I have never thought of it since without a quicker beating of heart and acute tingling of my nerves.

It was a beautiful July day, and even before daylight the street was full of teams. The farmers from every town within twenty miles were gathered to listen to what was expected to be the most sensational trial which had ever taken place within our borders. Horses were hitched along almost the whole length of every fence in the village. Yet there was no sound of loud talking, hardly of common conversation. The air seemed charged with electricity. It was reported that thirty or forty witnesses were to be examined, and that things would be said of which as yet the public had no conception.

When I had gone to bed on the evening be-

fore, it had been decided that I was not to attend the inquest, and grandmother had intended to stay at home with me. Indeed, I had understood at that time that grandfather would not allow any of us to go.

"It is too shocking a story for you to hear," he had concluded. "I cannot bear the thought of having you among that vulgar crowd."

Our breakfast was uncommonly early, and after that there was a reconsideration.

"We could scarcely hear anything more shocking than what we have heard already," Aunt Apphia reminded him.

"It seems to me that, if anybody ought to know all about it, we ought to," remarked Cousin Calista, with an air of determination which boded ill for grandfather.

"I think our being there will help a little—they say friends in court do affect the atmosphere," urged Aunt Jerry.

Elihu had been informed of everything by this time. Indeed, he had gained so fast that he was almost well. If the doctor had not interfered, he might have attempted to attend the inquest himself.

"Elihu wants me to go," pleaded Aunt Leah. "He says nobody tells him about

things so well as I do. He says he never shall know much about it unless I go and describe it for him."

"If the girls all go," remarked grandmother, with dignity, "the only proper way would be for me to accompany them."

Shannah had been moving in and out of the room, on one pretense or another. Now she turned and added decidedly, "Indade, and me not gettin' the better of this dreadful, venomous, la*ment*able business these three days now, Mrs. Wells! Sure, faith, an' it's afther goin' I must be—to quiet me narves like, Mrs. Wells. An' I can't get the better of it until it's all about it thot I know—an' me cousin in Wilkinsville thot crazy to hear it all thot it's a letther she wrote me, for to foind out all about it. An' I must be afther goin' to the inquest up to the Town Hall, an' sit wid the young ladies, if they wud be that kind to let me."

"And have I got to st—t—ay all al—lone?" I blubbered, seeing resolve written plainly on every one of the faces around me.

My poor grandfather demurred, and tried to argue the case a little, but even grandmother was against him, and every team that rattled

by seemed to add to the intense desire to go, on the part of every one of us. Of course, in the end we all went, and my grandfather managed to get good seats for us.

We were early in our places. I can feel to this moment the almost intolerable strain of the occasion. Soon all around and behind us the seats were crowded. Even the benches reserved for the witnesses were filled, except for a little space, which we could see plainly, since it was very near us. We knew that this little space was kept for Mr. Holly and Mr. Perrine. The awful thought occurred to me, what if they should not come? Then I pictured them, in my unreasonable little mind, as pursued by the sheriff, as a horse-thief in town had once been. He had been run down by the dogs, and brought back, crestfallen and plastered with mud, and I had seen him go by. The very idea of such degradation and humiliation, as connected with the young miners whom I so much loved, froze the blood in my little veins.

XII

THE INQUEST

"— pale mistrust
Wrinkled each brow."

Akenside.

CHAPTER XII

The Inquest

AT last, some minutes after the hands on the great clock in front had marked the hour set for beginning, the important men of the occasion came in. They advanced toward the front, pushing their way through the throng, which by this time occupied every available inch of space in the house. Men and boys were even climbing in through the windows, which were not many feet above the ground. First came Mr. Trimble, who was a big, fussy-looking man. He had an air as if he were managing the affairs of the universe. Then came grandfather's friend, 'Squire Wing—a spare, severe-looking gentleman, whose appearance did not reassure me concerning the fate of my idolized friends. A jury of six had been summoned by the sheriff (if my memory serves me rightly concerning the customs of those days, which differed materially from those of the present time). They were plain, but, it seemed to me,

rather harsh-looking farmers, one of whom was our old friend Jonas Beals, and all of whose faces were familiar to me. Then came the sheriff himself; and, last of all, looking to my admiring eyes like angels dropped among creatures of a very different sort, were Mr. Holly and Mr. Perrine, immaculately dressed, as usual, and carrying themselves with their usual dignity and self-possession.

As these personages trooped in, the house was painfully still, until our special friends appeared. Then a buzzing arose on all sides, and there was a general craning of necks. I felt myself growing hot with anger—for there was a note of spite and criticism in the confusion of sounds—and I thought my indignant heart would burst, when somebody near us whispered shrilly, "They thought they'd better keep nigh the sheriff—and, by gosh, they was wise."

The first witness to be examined was a certain Joel Larkin, who lived in the last Birchmont house before the main road crosses Witch Brook. He testified that the old man had stopped at his door "on the shank o' the evenin';" that Mrs. Larkin had given him a cup of milk and a cracker; that he had thanked

her, and that he had later sat a half-hour or more on the doorstep, braiding away at his never-ending whip-lash. Then he had said that "he wanted sympathy—all he wanted was sympathy," and had risen and wandered off in the gloaming. No one could be found who had seen him alive after this. Joel Larkin denied that he had given Uncle Ezra the cider-brandy. He was "sure none of his family could have done it." A ripple of incredulous laughter ran around the room when this bit of testimony was handed in. Joel Larkin was an intemperate and notoriously untruthful man, as I afterward learned. His word was therefore considered worthless on such matters as selling liquor; but he was kindhearted, and nobody for an instant suspected that he had done any intentional harm—as he understood harm—to the poor old man.

Then Eli Lathers was called, and told the tale of the finding of the body—a tale by this time familiar, down to the most trivial detail, to every person present, but all listened to its reiteration with breathless attention. He said that there had been no money in the old man's pocket. Joel Larkin had also testified that, though naturally he had not searched

Uncle Ezra's pockets, he had seen no signs of money about him, and he did not believe that he had any.

As Uncle Ezra's sister had given him no money, and believed that he had none, the question of how he paid for his fatal dram was, as I afterward learned, a great puzzle to the lawyers, until later, when grandfather explained the matter to them. Cousin Calista might have enlightened them earlier, if grandfather had allowed her to testify. Cider-brandy is an expensive luxury. Where did Uncle Ezra get that bottleful which had been his ruin? Joel Larkin probably lied when he said that he gave the old man only a cup of milk and a cracker,—but he was not the sort of person to be dealing out cider-brandy gratis. The bottle, with a few teaspoonfuls of the liquor still remaining in it, was produced at the inquest. It was a coarse, unmarked vial, holding perhaps a pint. The old man had been very thin, and his clothes had hung on him as if he had been what is called "a broomstick scarecrow." He was constantly stuffing all sorts of trash into his pockets, so that he might have carried several bottles like this without attracting any attention whatever.

The two doctors testified that, though he was probably unconscious at the time, he came to his death through a blow on the head, caused by some person or other creature unknown. The most careful examination, they said, had failed to indicate the nature of this blow. In order, apparently, to excuse themselves for their indefiniteness, they dwelt at length upon the thickness of the old man's gray hair and the softness and fineness of the sand in which he was lying, and which, as one of them said, "had been very abundantly scattered, either accidentally or purposely, over the wound."

As the doctor uttered the word "purposely," he laid considerable emphasis on it, and, possibly without intention, looked in the direction of Mr. Holly and Mr. Perrine. Both of them colored, Mr. Holly fiercely. Aunt Aphia saw it all, as I could tell from the shudder which ran through her body, against which I was closely pressed. She leaned forward, and for an instant I almost thought that she was going to spring up and say something; but soon she settled back again and looked as calm as ever.

A score or more of witnesses simply con-

firmed various portions of the well-known story. The whole scene was a brief, rude and unpoetic sort of version of "The Ring and the Book." I was nearly asleep, under the influence of the heat, the long strain and all, when a sudden interest was roused in me by hearing a witness say, "Oh, yes—it was the horses of the young fellers who are working a mine up to Jed Sears's place. There ain't no doubt o' that. One on 'em had that queer place in the shoe that Uncle Ezry saw himself when he was walkin' round the village one day."

The witness was the son of Eli Lathers, who had been left in charge of the body while his father had gone on to the village.

"I set there an' set there," he testified. "There warn't nothin' to do but to look at the tracks—not for fifteen minutes or more—an' I studied 'em over an' over. Our team had been along late in the afternoon. Then Jed Sears's colts had been down to the sawmill, hitched into his big lumber wagon. The tires are dretful wide, an' the' was a tremenjus heavy load, so they sunk in uncommon deep. Then the' hadn't been no other team along. The' was a big doo—I never see a bigger doo—an' right on top o' this doo the' was the tracks

o' the white horse an' the bay, that them minin' fellers rides. I follered them tracks both ways—oh, a good many rods—and all the time the' was this bad place in one o' the shoes."

"How close did the tracks come to the body of the murdered man?" inquired 'Squire Wing.

"Pretty clost," said the boy, shaking his head wisely, while we all held our breath. "They was kind o' queer and jammed in and circlin' round jest there, and it was so sandy that they wasn't so plain there as they was up an' down the road a ways—but I could tell enough to see that they come dretful clost."

"So close that they might have stepped on the body?"

"I should say they did," assented the boy. "Oh, yes, they did, fast enough."

My Aunt Apphia muttered under her breath, "What a falsehood!" and Aunt Jerry and Cousin Calista looked at each other darkly; but a sensation of another sort seemed to run through the great room. It was plain that the boy's story confirmed the theory held by the vast majority of those who were present. No other witnesses but this boy and his

brother had been able to say anything authoritative concerning the tracks in the road, for, as soon as the alarm was given, such throngs assembled on the scene that the sand was overturned in every direction.

Several had testified to hearing the young men go by their houses about midnight, but no one accused them of loud talking or other unseemly noise, except Eli Lathers, who was called back again after his boy had testified, in order that he might verify what had been said regarding the tracks. He refused to swear that the tracks lay "clost" beside the body. He "hadn't noticed, he was so scart." But he had noticed the passing of the young men that night, and he said ill-naturedly that they "fairly woke him out o' sound sleep, with their hollerin' and carryin' on."

"Did you suspect at the time that they had been drinking too much?"

"Wal—I did ruther, Square—it did look kinder that way."

The last witnesses called were the two young men, and it was upon them, of course, that the chief interest centered.

Though they were, as I have said, carefully

and rather elegantly attired, they had evidently taken pains to avoid wearing anything in the least showy. Their faces were pale and grave, and seemed to me to bear such a stamp of refinement and goodness that I could not believe anybody, seeing them, could possibly accuse them of such misdemeanors as were apparently to be laid to their charge.

George Holly was the first to be called. He mounted the platform with his usual dignity, and took his seat opposite 'Squire Wing. After he had been sworn and had given his name, he gave his address as at a certain number on a Boston street, and I heard grandfather whisper to Aunt Apphia, from his seat on the other side of her. "Oh-h, I wish he had said he lived at Jed Sears's."

"But he had to give what you call his voting residence—hadn't he, father?"

Grandfather mumbled a reluctant, "Perhaps so," and the examination proceeded.

"Your business?"

"I am a mining engineer."

"Were you acquainted with the deceased?"

"I saw him once."

"To speak with him?"

"He lifted my horse's foot, as it was standing in front of a house in the village, and I told him to put it down."

"You had no grudge against the old man?"

"None whatever."

"You passed over the road late on the night of his death. Where had you been, and why were you out so late? Tell us briefly about it."

"With my friend, Mr. Perrine, I had been to the village to make a social call at the residence of 'Squire Wells. We were given refreshments there, but the only beverages which were served were tea and raspberry shrub"—a slight giggle ran through the room—"and we had nothing more after leaving there. It was a fine night, and we rode along at only a comfortable rate of speed. It must have been about midnight when we turned into the Witch Brook road. I did not notice it much at the time, but after I had passed the spot where the body of this man was found, I remarked to my friend that that dark bunch in the sand there looked like the body of a man. He rejoined lightly that it was nothing but a heap of brush or stones—and I thought nothing more of it. As we did not learn of the murder until the second day afterward"—

profound sensation for more than a minute—"I repeat, sir, that we knew nothing of this unfortunate affair until Friday morning, when we called to do an errand"—suppressed giggling again in several quarters—"at the residence of 'Squire Wells—it is not strange that I did not at first remember the circumstance."

"You passed straight along the road?"

"Perfectly straight."

"You remained on your horse's back during the whole trip?"

"Neither one of us dismounted from the time we left the village until we reached the Jed Sears place."

"You are sure that your horse did not step on this dark heap, or kick at it or touch it?"

"Perfectly sure."

Several more questions were asked, and the same or similar ones were put to Richard Perrine, but no further facts of importance were elicited, and 'Squire Wing remarked to the jury, with a short *resumé* of the testimony, that there seemed to be no ground for holding any one for the murder of Ezra Parkins. They consulted together a few moments without leaving their seats, and presently the verdict was pronounced that Uncle Ezra came to his

death, while intoxicated, through some cause or causes unknown.

My grandfather in a relieved way began to mop the moisture on his bald head. Cousin Calista heaved a deep, long sigh, and I could see the color coming back to the faces of the rest of the family. It seemed as though we had waked up from a nightmare; but I was soon reminded that all was not yet over. Aunt Apphia stopped on our way out through the crowd, to speak to an old neighbor. As I stood grasping her hand tightly to avoid being swept on with the multitude, two rough men whom I did not know were wedged in beside me for a moment. They were talking in low, growling tones.

"I believe one o' them ——— dandies done it," said one. "If I had my way, I'd hold 'em, an' I'd try 'em in short order—an' I'd string 'em up. It's my belief they desarve it."

"You never spoke truer," assented the other one in a tone full of malice. "I seen that big one when he gin it to Uncle Ezry for meddlin' with his horse—an' by ——— I'd like to 'a' gin him a punch in the head."

"Oh, he done it—an' he done it a-purpose," affirmed the other.

The old, sickening fear was roused within me. What if there were ever so many people who agreed with these vulgar men! Might they not succeed in getting Mr. Holly and Mr. Perrine arrested, after all?

As soon as we were well out of the hall, I told Aunt Apphia what I had heard. She listened to it with eager and abundant wrath, and bade me never repeat it to any one outside of the family.

"But they didn't do it!" I cried, indignantly.

"No, but so long as there are feelings abroad such as these rude men have toward them, such things will be said. I don't see how they can do any harm, and they are bound to die out, little by little. Time will pass, and other things will happen and crowd out this. Just don't say anything about it to anybody."

My grandfather gave the same counsel to us when we were all together for family prayers that evening. It was good counsel—but, in spite of all our wisdom, affairs often will take their own way, without regard to our intentions; and it was thus in this instance.

The young men attended the funeral, sitting

with our family and behaving in their usual irreproachable way. Then they came home with us, and we had a quiet dinner together. It was shadowed for me—and, I fancied, at least for one other—by the fact that Aunt Apphia, though she had been to the funeral with the rest of us, had gone to her room immediately afterward, on her old plea of a headache, and there she remained until after our guests had gone.

For three or four days we led a most monotonous and uneventful existence. At the breakfast-table on the morning of the fifth day Cousin Calista could bear it no longer.

"Oh, I never saw anything so deadly dull as this place is, and all of us, too," she burst forth. "I am just stifling. It is absurd that we can't have any fun—not even go on an innocent picnic—just because of that old idiot."

My grandfather dropped his knife and fork and gave her a look such as one remembers, while a dark red color mounted up his cheeks.

"Do you not know, Calista," he thundered, in a voice which struck terror to our souls, "that the most frightful calamity which can befall humanity has just taken place in this town? And cannot you realize that the two

young men whom we all like so much, and to whom we are so much indebted, have only just escaped with their lives? They are not yet out of danger—for there are scores of men in this village who believe that they are guilty at least of manslaughter."

Here he pulled himself up, and looked around on us with a more benevolent air.

"I don't mean that you should go into mourning or sit in sackcloth and ashes, as the Scriptures have it, but you must never speak lightly of old Ezra Parkins—nor of what has happened—and you must not think of having any special merry-makings for at least several weeks."

Cousin Calista pouted.

"It will be winter-time then," she muttered.

"Well," he reminded her, "you and Jerry are going to visit your uncle in the city in November. You have pleasant prospects. Just now common prudence and decency require that we should be quiet."

He pushed back his chair, and nothing more was said on the subject. In his morning petition he prayed with uncommon fervor that those guilty of the infamous crime which had so disquieted our community might speedily

be brought to justice. It was plain to see that he was thinking night and day, in the hope of finding some way of removing from the fair names of those to whom we were so heavily indebted, the foul and hateful stain which had fallen upon them.

Though we worked assiduously in the garden and orchard, and took long rides behind Tansy and on her back and Lady Jane's, and though we read aloud and embroidered and did everything that we could think of, the next few days passed heavily. We could not forget the nerve-trying events of the past fortnight, and few of us slept soundly.

One evening, when Shannah was sitting on the kitchen doorstep in the twilight, looking lonely and forlorn, I sat down beside her and took her hand lovingly.

"Are you homesick for the ould counthry, Shannah, mavourneen?" I asked her, trying to help her by using the accents that she had taught me.

"Ow—it's not that, at all, at all," she shuddered out. "It schkares me so, darlint—that murder an' all! An' the Square goin' on so fierce wid the young ladies, an' sayin' it might be thot those grand young men

iver did thot venomous, la*ment*able thing, whin we know it do be unpossible, Miss Barbara. An' yet, there do be men thot bad, I'm afther thinkin' sure enough, thot they might get our young men arristed an' put in jail, swateheart—they might thot—an' I can't get the better of the old man thot was killed—an' me a-seein' of thot old man ivery day or so these long years now. Oo—oo! I do be afther dramin' about it o' nights. Did somebody crape up behint him and sthrike him on his head, I wonder, honey? Oo—oo, it is fierce, honey, an' poor Shannah can't get the betther of it."

Shannah caught me up and pressed me hard in her arms, until I felt the relic on her faithful bosom. I said nothing to Aunt Apphia of this fervid outburst. I knew that she would have no patience with Shannah for thus stirring up my already overwrought imagination; —but my own dreams were not rendered any more cheerful by the additional layers of color which poor Shannah's words had added to the pictures with which I was already familiar.

XIII

AN UNEXPECTED WITNESS

"The morally insane man does not look upon his crimes as bad, but commits them with the same unconcern as that with which a sane man would perform an ordinary or virtuous act, and after his misdeeds is quite contented with himself."

Max Nordau.

CHAPTER XIII

An Unexpected Witness

THE second week after the funeral was quite as dreary as the first. The only person who seemed to get any enjoyment at all was grandmother, whose annual carnival of jelly and marmalade-making and pickling went on with unprecedented fury. She had never had us all so completely at her mercy, and she put up enough preserves and conserves to supply the entire village. Grandmother was a generous soul, but her means for many years had been limited. We raised quantities of berries and fruit, however, and the cost of putting them up was comparatively trifling. Thus she amassed a store of desirable capital, which she showered freely on all her invalid friends. Her presents bore a strong family likeness to each other—but they were good, and everybody was glad to get them.

Cousin Calista in these days was openly and avowedly cross. Aunt Jerry accused her of

being in love, and rattled off dozens of sentimental couplets, which she declared that she had found lying around the house in Cousin Calista's handwriting. We all laughed at her nonsense, Cousin Calista with the rest of us; but she was visibly annoyed, and a new idea was lodged in my astute little brain. I understood better her obstinate ride, the depth of her subsequent repentance, and her present mood of uneasy sulkiness.

After two weeks had passed, we began to think that a certain dinner-call was overdue. We listened again for horses' feet on the bridge, and rushed nervously to the windows when we heard teams go by. We suspected—I had heard Aunt Apphia and Aunt Jerry talking it over privately—that grandfather had suggested to the young men that they might discreetly keep rather close for awhile—but Aunt Jerry was somewhat shocked, after all, by what was undoubtedly a flagrant infringement of etiquette, especially when the result was such decided *ennui* in the household.

Elihu Trimble had been well for some time now, and he came up on his horse nearly every evening. Then Tansy was saddled for Aunt Leah, and they went off for a canter up and

down the river. Sometimes I was permitted to go on a pillion behind one or the other of them, but not often, for they did not care to have my sharp little ears listening to all of the sentimental nothings, of which, in my critical judgment, their conversation chiefly consisted.

One evening, when they had just ridden off and we were sitting around the open door, some of us in chairs just within the hall, some of us on the big stone steps outside, Cousin Calista yawned and remarked, "I declare, I wish somebody would come. I saw Tom Ballantyne around yesterday. I should think he would run up. I should be glad to see Timothy Boggs. Even your friend Silas Doty would be a relief, Affie."

"Why, yes, what has become of Silas, I wonder," mused Aunt Jerry. "He hasn't been in for a book for weeks, has he, Affie?"

"No," answered Aunt Apphia, shortly.

"I saw him out here the day Uncle Ezra lifted the horse's foot," said Cousin Calista.

"That fellow has sinister and furtive looks somehow," Aunt Jerry went on. "I have seen him wandering around here in the twilights. I believe he will go crazy sometime—he has just that kind of an expression on his face."

"I don't think so," expostulated Aunt Aphia, but rather coldly. "I have heard that he is working a farm on shares and doing well. I think his mind is all right. All the same, I would just as soon he wouldn't come around, even for the purpose of dispelling the languors which seem to rest so heavily upon you."

My grandmother, who was rocking in her special chair just inside the door, seized the opportunity for a little moral lecture.

"You girls are suffering now for the way you have been treating the village boys ever since you made these fine new friends in Hickory. You have snubbed and neglected your old companions, and they feel it, and I don't blame them. Very likely the young men in Hickory will get through working their mine before long. They do not seem to be making much out of it—and they have had such a disagreeable experience here that they may be quite ready to abandon the place. Then you will probably never see them again, and you will wish that you had been more considerate of the feelings of your old Birchmont playmates."

"Oh, mother, don't worry," said Aunt Jerry, with an air of labored indifference. "We can

stand it, even if the hyacinthine Tom Ballantyne and the fascinating Mr. Boggs never darken our doors again. Calista can still play on her harp, and the rest of us can dance around the parlor. We shall live right along."

"Then don't let me hear you complain again of loneliness," said grandmother sharply.

Suddenly, an awkward, shambling figure came along the street and began portentously to slow up, just outside our gate.

"There is Silas now, upon my word!" giggled Aunt Jerry.

"Speak of angels!" laughed Cousin Calista.

Silas opened the gate and advanced a step or two up the walk, but nobody rose to welcome him. Aunt Apphia had made at first as though she would run away. Then she seemed to think better of it. She rose at last with a vast amount of dignity, and advanced a step forward to meet him. Her air was really quite majestic, and it seemed to me that she was likely to frighten poor Silas.

"Good evening, Silas," said Aunt Apphia civilly, but not cordially. "It has been a long time since we saw you. Do you want a book?"

"Good evening, Miss Affie. Good evening, ladies," began Silas, with elaborate politeness, and holding his hat uneasily in his hand. "No—n—no, Miss Affie, thank you, I don't want any book to-night. The rowen is coming on pretty soon now, an' we've got consid'-able rye an' stuff to harvest, an' I ain't havin' so much time to read as I shall, come fall. No—I jest called to see ye a minute or two. I've got somethin' kinder important to talk over with ye—somethin' I guess will kinder interest ye," added Silas, in a spicy and appetizing manner. "I thought maybe you would go to walk a little ways with me—'most anywhere—I don't care where, so long's we can talk."

Aunt Apphia hesitated. In spite of the inducements which Silas was offering her, the memory of her last interview with him gave her little zest for another. Still, since he had something to tell her, which he fancied important, why, she ought perhaps to go. Besides, Cousin Calista and Aunt Jerry were making fun of Silas every minute. She could hear them mimicking him under their breath, and she felt sure that it was a question of

only a few seconds before he would hear them also. She must do something at once.

"Very well, Silas," she said sedately. "You and Barbara and I will stroll down in the meadow. The grass has just been cut there, and we shall not get wet."

Silas gazed at me with profound disapproval, but Aunt Apphia took my hand with decision, and we walked around the house and through the long, bright garden into "the field." When we at last reached the open meadow, Silas pointed to me and said: "Miss Affie, I'm goin' to say some things to you that nobody else must know. It's more important, mebbe, than you think. I'm afraid she will tell."

"Oh, no, she won't," declared Aunt Apphia, positively. "She is too small to understand the meaning of things, and she is no talker at all. I am sure she would never tell, especially if I should make her promise not to. Remember, darling, you must never tell any one what Silas tells me to-night."

"No, auntie," I affirmed solemnly, "I won't. I certainly won't."

Silas looked dissatisfied still. He had hoped,

no doubt, that I should be sent back to the house when Aunt Apphia became properly impressed with the momentous nature of his message; but finally he decided to go on.

Several times he cleared his throat and made an inarticulate noise, as if he were surely going to begin. Then he would lose his courage and stop. Aunt Apphia walked along, with what seemed to me an almost cruel indifference to his sufferings. She made absolutely no effort to help him. Once in a while she would stoop to look for a four-leaved clover, or turn to watch the sunset. All of which did not tend to calm the mind of Silas.

At last, he managed to stammer out, "Miss Affie—Miss Affie—say, now, what do you think? Do you really think those fine young men up to Hickory really did—well—really did kill Uncle Ezry Parkins?"

"Mercy, no!" cried Aunt Apphia, who had not imagined that Silas would recur to this distasteful subject. "Nobody who is sensible could for an instant think that they did."

"Indeed, you never were more mistaken in your life!" cried Silas, finding his tongue with a vengeance. "There are dozens of folks that

believe it. They think it was jest as the Larkin boy said—the tracks *did* go close up—and over, mind you, Miss Affie, *over*—Uncle Ezry's body. They think Square Wing oughter of ordered 'em arrested, instid o' callin' what the Larkin boy said no account, an' callin' what the fellers said themselves, law and gospel. Course they would say they hadn't had nothin' to drink. Course they would say they knew they never touched the body. If the Square hadn't been mighty friendly to 'em, he would 'a' had 'em arrested. There's goin' to be a move to arrest 'em yet, so folks say. Some of 'em have been to the sheriff about it. There's talk of gettin' out a warrant —pretty soon, too."

Silas's tone became fairly menacing. I was alarmed, and tightened my hold upon Aunt Apphia's hand.

"It seems to me too silly to be talked of seriously," commented Aunt Apphia. I could see that she was having a struggle to retain her self-control, but Silas could not have suspected it from her level tone and deliberate manner. "There was no motive for them to hurt that poor old man. Why should they have wanted to do it?"

"Oh, out of spite, mebbe—mebbe somethin' else," declared Silas, with conviction. "There was sights o' folks see how mad one on 'em got that day Uncle Ezry took hold of his precious horse's foot. I seen him myself. He got tearin' mad, an' spoke up—wal, regilar insultin' to Uncle Ezry."

"I heard him," said Aunt Apphia coldly. "He was annoyed, but he was gentlemanly enough."

"That ain't the way most folks think," insisted Silas sullenly. "Oh, they're high-fliers—them fellers be. They're from Bostin, I hear—an' they're rich enough so's't if they should sink ten thousand dollars in that 'mine,' 's they call it—nothin' in it but fool's gold, folks say—they wouldn't mind it a mite. I s'pose they've got a sight o' money—an' they feel so big that us folks here—why, I s'pose we seem like so many teenty, wuthless sorter maggots or somethin', to 'em. I s'pose they might a' felt—I don't say they did, Miss Affie—but they might 'a' felt as if, if they sorter took a notion to run down old Uncle Ezry, jest to have a little mite o' fun—or because it was easier than it was not to—why, I s'pose they might 'a' done it."

"Silas!" cried Aunt Apphia angrily, "you shall not talk so! It is wicked. Not a word of it is true."

"Now don't get mad, Miss Affie—don't," pleaded Silas. "I'm only jest tellin' you what folks say—an' it *is* what they say—an' I can't help it—an' you might's well understand it—for it's true as gospel—an' that's what anybody 'long the street'll tell you."

"Well, it is a disgrace to Birchmont that such accusations should be made against innocent men," declared Aunt Apphia hotly. "But, fortunately, it doesn't make any difference. Even if some harebrained rascal should get them arrested, nothing could possibly be proved against them."

By this time we had reached the end of the field. There was a large rock here on which we often sat, and now Aunt Apphia dropped upon this and motioned Silas to sit down beside her.

"That ain't what a good many think, Miss Affie," still insisted Silas pertinaciously. "There have some things come up since the inquest. There's a sight of evidence that didn't get in then. There always is a lot that sorter dribbles out afterwards, a little at

a time. An' some of the men may get out a warrant—yes, they may. Oh, I know," continued Silas in a tone of agony, "that they've been danglin' around you girls, an' you think they're all right—an' mebbe they be—but again mebbe they ain't. They probably let on to fall in love with a mess o' girls in every town they go to," proceeded Silas artfully. "Then they leave 'em, an' go on to the next place—an' *them* girls will think they're perfectly lovely, too—oh, that's their style. They's sights o' them fellers lyin' around loose everywhere—sights on 'em. Oh, Miss Affie, I wisht you'd send her off somewhere for jest a few minutes—jest a few minutes! Can't she go an' pick a bunch o' them daisies off up there?"

I was accordingly dispatched to the hillside to pick daisies, and I went dutifully enough; but the place was profoundly quiet, and a light wind was blowing toward me, and Silas, under the stress of his emotions, spoke in a voice louder than he meant to use. Consequently I heard distinctly nearly every word that he said.

"I s'pose you've noticed," began Silas cau-

tiously, "that them fellers haven't been around—not since the funeral."

"You seem to keep very close track of their movements," remarked Aunt Apphia sarcastically.

"Yes, I do, I do," he assented eagerly, and without a trace of shame. "I can tell you every time they have been down to the village ever since the horse ran away."

Aunt Apphia's breath was nearly taken away by this frank admission.

"I don't think that is very creditable to you, Silas," she said sternly. "Why under the sun do you pursue them in this way? It doesn't look very well."

"I don't care!" he sobbed out, while his breath began to come in great gulps. "I do know—an' I have followed 'em—an' I shall do it again—an' if that big one is after you the way I think he is, he will have to fight me for you—he will that, Miss Affie. For I've loved you so long, Miss Affie—an' he ain't but jest come—an' he ain't the sort to be good to you—oh, he ain't, Miss Affie—an' I've got to have you—I told you so—an' every day I say it over an' over to myself, 'I've got to

have her'—an' it seems as if—it does, Miss Affie, an' you might as well know it—it seems as if I would *kill* anybody that wanted to get you away from me."

Aunt Apphia's keen mind had been ranging over the situation ever since she had begun to catch the thread of Silas's discourse. Now she gave a sudden gasp and cried sharply, "Silas—you say you followed them everywhere. Did you follow them that night? Did you, Silas?"

She caught his great hand in hers and gave it a peremptory shake, while her voice had that in it which compelled his answer.

"Ye-es," he stammered unwillingly. "That is—I didn't rightly follow 'em—not exactly."

"Well—what then?" she demanded imperiously.

"Oh, Miss Affie—that was what I wanted to tell you—that was what I came around for tonight—I wanted to tell you—that I was up there, right on the Witch Brook road—that night."

"Had you followed them?" she asked.

"No—I hadn't—not that—but I had been hangin' around here listenin' to the talk an' laughin'—an' I got kinder impatient—an' so

I rode along ahead of 'em, an' I got into those woods along there, close by where Uncle Ezry was a-layin'—but I hadn't no idea he was a-layin' there—and then I scrooched down in the woods, an' sorter waited for 'em to come along."

"That was nice business, I must say, Silas," affirmed Aunt Apphia contemptuously. "Oh, I never thought you would do anything so mean! Well—go on—what did you see?"

"That's it," said Silas cunningly. "What did I see? Nobody in this world but you knows that I was up there that night—nobody knows what I saw. But I will tell you, Miss Affie—I will tell *you*—on one condition. If you'll marry me, Miss Affie—oh, Miss Affie—if you will only marry me—I will tell you all about it!"

XIV

SILAS DOTY'S CONFESSION

"Insincerity is the last desperate resource of a sincere woman in distress."

Helen Dawes Brown.

CHAPTER XIV

Silas Doty's Confession

AUNT APPHIA could not speak. She simply sat and gazed at him helplessly.

"Don't you see," he resumed wildly,—there was more than a hint of frenzy in his manner —"don't you see that I can settle it all? If you want to have them set right,—or anything,—don't you see that I can do it? And there isn't anybody else on earth who can. And I won't do it,—I will die without letting anybody know,—unless you say you will have me,—I will,—I swan an' I swear an' I vum I will,"—this silly string of oaths, a common one among the children of the town, took on an actual seriousness from the concentrated determination of his tone,—"unless you promise you will have me."

Aunt Apphia sprang up now with an even greater determination than his written on her face. She compassed the importance of it all,

and she felt her whole being rising to the occasion.

"Silas," she exclaimed in a voice the ring of which seemed to cow him, "you are all wrong in this matter,—but I cannot settle it in my mind to-night. I am too much shocked and amazed at what you have told me. Come to me to-morrow night,—come at half-past six, and I shall be ready with my answer."

"Oh, no, tell me now, Miss Affie," he pleaded, alarmed at the majesty of her bearing.

"I shall not," she returned decidedly.

"But I am afraid you will tell,—oh, you won't tell, Miss Affie? If you tell anybody a single word of all this that I have said, Miss Affie, I will kill myself,—yes, I will,—I will kill myself without telling anybody what I saw up there,—I will, if you don't promise me, solemn and true, that you won't tell anybody a single word."

Aunt Apphia looked contemptuously at the poor wretch, who was groveling by this time in the very grass at her feet. For a moment she regarded him thoughtfully without speaking. Then she seemed to see her way clearly.

"Get up, Silas," she said at last. "I will

promise you. I will tell no one whatever any word of what you have said to me to-night."

She called to me. I was already halfway down the hillside, for I had started toward her as soon as she had risen from her seat.

"Make her promise, too," he begged abjectly. "She might have heard something."

"I did promise," I piped up promptly, "I promised once, but I would just as soon promise again."

Then we walked on silently over the dewy meadow, and along the sweet garden path, where the new jockey clubs were burdening the air with their overpowering fragrance, and down to the front gate. There Silas turned once more, and, bidding good-night to the rest of the family, who were still sitting there, he flung out in a hoarse growl under his breath to Aunt Apphia, "Oh, you won't tell, will you, Miss Affie?" And Aunt Apphia answered scornfully, "I have promised, Silas. Good-night."

I could feel her hand cold and rigid in mine when she turned away.

"You have had quite an interview with Silas," laughed Cousin Calista, as we ap-

proached the door, after watching his tall figure until it had slouched away almost out of sight.

"Thank goodness, I wasn't in your shoes!" added Aunt Jerry lightly.

Aunt Apphia said nothing, but we both of us thought that Aunt Jerry might have rather liked to hear what Silas had to say, after all. Presently Aunt Apphia complained that she was too tired to sit up any longer, and we went off to bed together.

All night she tossed and murmured. Once or twice when I awoke, I found her place vacant, and raising myself up in bed, could see her leaning out of the window.

"Are you sick, auntie?" I whispered in distress.

"No, no, darling,—go to sleep. It is so hot, auntie had to come to the window to get a breath of air."

I wondered if she were making up her mind to tell Silas that she would marry him. This was not my programme for her, since I had long ago decided that she was to become the wife of my adored Mr. Holly. Still, I had pondered over the matter, and I felt that, if Silas could remove from Mr. Holly the stain

and suspicion now resting upon him, perhaps it was Aunt Apphia's duty to marry this strange witness. In that case, a glimmering hope for myself, which had always lingered latent in my heart, might burst into full effluence. I might marry Mr. Holly myself.

I knew better than to ask any questions of Aunt Apphia, or to make any remarks whatever upon the dilemma in which Silas had placed her. But I could see from her bearing the next morning, that she had arrived at some sort of a conclusion. I was confirmed in this opinion when, during the forenoon, she came into the east room, where grandfather was busy with his law-work and I was sitting with him. She shut the door behind her, and said, "Father, I want you to be in the dining-room this evening at half-past six with the sheriff. Don't be frightened,—but I think it possible that something quite important may happen, —and not, on the whole, disagreeable. I wish you to have the door into this room slightly ajar, so that you and he can hear every word that is said."

My grandfather looked mystified and worried.

"I am not permitted to tell you anything

more," pursued Aunt Apphia, "but I am sure you have confidence enough in me to be sure that I know what I am about. I thought you had better, perhaps, inform Mr. Dart right away, in order to be certain that he will be able to come. He had better be prepared to arrest somebody."

"This is really very sensational," said grandfather, shaking his head. "But I will try to do as you say and bide your time for explanations."

He took his hat and went out, after promising Aunt Apphia to maintain the strictest secrecy regarding the whole matter.

It seemed to me that the afternoon would never end, but at last the supper was over and we were sitting again on the steps and around the front door, as usual.

"Why, Affie, there comes Silas again," exclaimed Aunt Jerry.

"Did you expect him?" asked Cousin Calista.

"Yes,—he had a little unfinished business left over from last night," said Aunt Apphia grimly.

"Really!" laughed Aunt Jerry. "This

looks suspicious. What can you and Silas be up to!"

By this time Silas, his manner a singular mixture of trepidation and insolence, had reached the gate. Aunt Apphia rose promptly to receive him. Her voice was so pleasant when she asked him to "come in" that I could scarcely believe my ears. He was even more surprised than I was, and a broad smile overspread his half-simple, half-cunning countenance, as he followed her into the east room.

"Sit down," she said, as she motioned him to a chair.

"I don't like to talk in the house," he began uneasily. "Somebody might hear us."

"You can talk as softly as you like," said Aunt Apphia coolly, "but I do not care to walk out this evening. I will shut the door so that the people on the steps need not hear you." She closed firmly the door opening into the front hall. The door into the dining-room was already nearly closed. I slunk away into a corner of the sofa, and laid my head on the pillow there. Silas looked at me darkly, but Aunt Apphia said, "She won't do any more harm than a little kitten," and loftily

dismissed the subject, after which I was wise enough to keep perfectly still.

It was now nearly seven o'clock. The vines over the window and the big maple trees in front made it seem even later. The room was really quite dim.

"Well," commenced Silas, when we were fairly seated. "Will you do it, Miss Affie?"

"Let me see if I understand your proposition, Silas," said Aunt Apphia in a clear voice. "You were in the habit of following Mr. Holly and Mr. Perrine every time they started from the village for home. You hated them, and you had fully intended to kill one of them, in case you found out that he interfered with your plans. Is that so?"

"'Tain't exactly that way," grumbled Silas.

"Why, that was what you told me. You certainly said that you would kill one of those young men, if you found certain conditions to prevail—now didn't you?"

"Ye—es," admitted Silas doggedly.

"On that night, still with this desire for murder in your heart, you lurked beside the road near the spot where Uncle Ezra Parkins was lying. Did you have a gun or pistol with you, Silas?"

"I do' know what difference that makes," growled Silas.

"I want to understand this case exactly as it is," pursued Aunt Apphia unfalteringly. "Answer my question."

"Yes, I had a pistol, but I didn't fire any pistol," answered poor, silly Silas, utterly failing to sense Aunt Apphia's plot. "I don't see what that has to do with it."

"Oh, it has a good deal to do with it," she answered, smiling, but with a whiteness on her face, which revealed how much she was stirred. "And you crouched there in the woods with your pistol in your hand, waiting for those young men to come along, and you saw them come along, and you saw what murdered Uncle Ezra—you saw the whole thing."

"I saw the whole thing," repeated Silas with intense self-satisfaction, still oblivious of the net into which he was being dragged.

"But you kept silence at the inquest. You allowed the fair name of innocent men to be—"

"Who said they were innocent?" demanded Silas hoarsely. "I never said they were innocent. Mebbe they ain't innocent, but I know,

an' I'm the only being on God's earth that does know, an' I never will tell, I never will, so help me, if you don't marry me, Miss Affie."

Aunt Apphia hurried across the room and threw open the door. In walked my grandfather, accompanied by Mr. Duncan Dart, who said calmly, "I arrest you, Silas—sorry to do it, an old neighbor so—but we have to do disagreeable things, you know, sometimes. I arrest you for carrying concealed weapons with intent to kill. You have said so, and there is nothing to do but arrest you."

Silas looked dumbfounded. Then he turned reproachfully to Aunt Apphia.

"I did not tell, Silas," she answered. "I simply asked my father to be here so that he might hear our conversation. I knew that you were a criminal, and I should therefore have been justified in breaking my promise. It was impossible for me to accede to your request. It was impossible before, and it was doubly impossible after I had heard how wicked you had been. Why, I never knew of anybody else so wicked, and yet you do not seem in the least to realize it."

"You may go out and shut the door," suggested my grandfather, pushing Aunt Apphia

and me gently away. "Mr. Dart and I will labor for a few moments with Silas. It may not be necessary to shut him up."

For nearly an hour my grandfather and the sheriff talked with Silas, while Aunt Apphia and I sat shudderingly in a corner of the big old chintz-covered lounge in the dining-room. We knew that the girls and grandmother were wondering at the long interview which we were having with Silas, but Aunt Apphia was too much distraught to go around to the front hall and sit with them, laughing and joking, when such vital subjects were under discussion. So we sat there and waited. Would grandfather be able to make Silas confess? And would Silas then go off and kill himself? Oh, what did he see? And would Mr. Dart really shut Silas up in jail?

I whispered these questions and others like them into Aunt Apphia's ear from time to time; but all that she could say in reply was simply, "Oh, I don't know, dear. For pity's sake, don't talk."

Poor Aunt Apphia had borne almost as much as she could endure.

At length we could hear that grandfather's tone, which had been stern and threatening,

had grown more gentle. A few minutes later he opened the door and called for a light. Aunt Apphia hurried to bring it, and then he told her to remain. "Barbara, call the others," he added, and, speechless with wonder, they all came straggling in. I did not omit Shannah. She was out in the garden, but she came running when I called her name from the back steps, and we slipped into the east room just as my grandfather was announcing, in a grand and formal way, that Silas had a few statements to make to us.

Silas began to speak, but he mumbled his words so that we could not understand anything.

"Shall I say it for you?" asked grandfather, rather impatiently.

"No, I will say it," said Silas, bracing himself; and then he poured out a long and rambling account of his adventures. The main part of what he had to say was already familiar to us. The interesting part of it began when he related how, after sitting among the bushes for a half-hour or more, he observed that, not a dozen rods from him, and somewhat to the north, there was a dark heap on the sand. The bank was high there, and had

been cut away in digging sand and gravel until the woods at the back stood on a ridge, which in some places was ten or fifteen feet high. Silas was lying on top of this ridge, and he might easily have seen the body before, except for the fact that he had been so keenly watching the road to the southward that he had not thought to look elsewhere.

"I listened," he continued, "but I couldn't hear the horses, so I knew I should have time to go down and see what that thing was, before they could come. I jumped down the bank, and as soon as I got close to him I knew it was Uncle Ezry. The moon didn't light up much there, because the woods are so shady and high on both sides of the road. I knew well enough that he had been drinkin', for he always would drink if he could manage to beg, borrow or steal any liquor, an' I shook him an' tried to rouse him. I said, 'You don't want to be out here all night, Uncle Ezry,' but he only groaned and turned himself a little mite, an' I saw it wa'n't any use; an' it wa'n't cold, an' he wa'n't anywhere near the road; he was a full eight or nine feet from it, and there wa'n't a chance out of a million that anybody except these mine fellers would

go by all night long, an' so I didn't see as it would do any harm to let him lay there."

"And he was alive then and all right?" inquired my grandfather.

"He was jest as live as I am this minute," affirmed Silas. "He moved and mumbled. Then I began to think it was gettin' time for the fellers to come along, an' so I up an' jumped on to the bank again an' hid where I was before, an' it was mighty lucky for me that I did"—Silas's voice grew low and deep —"for if I had stayed there, I might have been killed 'long with Uncle Ezry."

We were all listening with such eagerness that it was painful. The words hurt me as they fell upon my eager ears, and I could see that everybody else was almost ready to collapse from the strain.

"Then—" said my grandfather.

"Then," continued Silas, unwillingly, but with a certain zest in telling what he knew to be one of the most interesting tales which his auditors would ever hear, "then all of a sudden I heard a crashin' in the woods on the other side of the road, an awful noise, like the smashin' of a lot of dishes, mixed with thunder and snortin' and yelpin'—the most dreadful

noise I ever heard or hope to hear. And it came nearer and nearer, an' all of a sudden somethin' busted like a whirlwind out of the woods there—it was all so quick, from the first I heard of the noise till this thing busted out on me—that I couldn't have counted five; you never saw anythin' so loud an' so scarey an' so sorter terrible! An' this thing dashed, as if the Old Scratch himself was after it, right acrost the road, an' right over Uncle Ezry, an' then it clum the bank, an' jumped right up it, like mad, an' went crashin' through the woods, further an' further off, till I couldn't hear it no longer. Why, I was layin' on the ground like a rag when it was all over. Mebbe I fainted away; I do' know. I know I didn't stir for quite awhile. I guess it was hearin' the mine fellers comin' that roused me up. It might have been only ten or fifteen minutes afterwards that they come along, or it might have been an hour or two. I was that dazed-like an' used up I didn't know whether time was passin' or not, but the first I knew, there they was, close by, walkin' their horses along, easy-like—they never thought what had happened. They hadn't heard anything, likely, of all that racket—'way down on

the river road so. 'Tain't likely anybody on earth heard it but me.

"After they had gone I lay there on the ground thinkin'. My head had sorter cleared up by this time, an' I made up my mind that the thing that had dashed right over Uncle Ezry and into the woods was Jed Sears's old sorrel mare. I had seen her time and time again—and she was a long, lopin' kind of an old thing—and I knew she had been out to pasture pretty much all summer. She must 'a' been scart almost to death of something. I tried to think it over, an' it sorter come to me that there was somethin' snarlin' an' yelpin' like, follerin' right after her—but mebbe 'twa'n't so. If 'twas, it's likely it might 'a' been a wildcat—there's sights of 'em up on the mountain there—but I didn't know they ever set onto horses. There has been a pretty cross bull there. Maybe he tried to hook the old horse—he's ugly enough. I s'pose likely we never shall know what it was that scart that horse, but she was the scartest thing I ever see or hope to see, long's I live."

"Well," interrupted my grandfather, "I suppose you went down into the road after you had recovered from your panic."

That word seemed to offend Silas.

"I wa'n't in a panic," he averred resentfully. "I was jest the same—sorter startled like—as you would have been, Square, if you'd had such a thing come right down upon you when you had been a-layin' quiet there in the bushes."

"Yes, but I shouldn't have been there," said my grandfather grimly.

Silas turned very red. Grandfather had evidently worked upon his fears, and opened his mind in such a way as to show him something of the enormity of the crime of which he had been guilty.

"Go on, go on," urged grandfather, as Silas choked up and faltered. "Tell us what you found when you went down out of the woods."

XV

A PICNIC

"It was a hill plaste in an open plaine
That round about was bordered with a wood
Of matchless height, that seemed th' earth to disdaine;
In which all trees of honor stately stood,
Spreading pavilions for the birds to bowre.

* * * * * * * * * *

An at the foot thereof a gentle flud
His silver waves did softly tumble down."

Edmund Spenser.

CHAPTER XV

A Picnic

"WHY—I found jest what I told you," said Silas, sullenly. "The horse had stepped right onto Uncle Ezry's head. You can see from that how scart he was, for horses never step on folks, they say, unless they are nigh out o' their wits. You see, the horse, as fur as I could make out, was goin' in big jumps. It didn't seem to me as if he struck the ground more than once or twice from the piece o' woods on the other side to the bank on this one—but the' ain't no doubt he struck on Uncle Ezry's head one time. The sand was all over him—for the horse's feet had flung up a sight of it. I dragged him out of the shade to a place where the moonlight struck bright on him, an' then I could see that his hair was all bloody—matted-like, with blood an' sand. I could see plain enough, too, that he was done for. Then I was more scart than I was before—for I thought folks might think I had

murdered him—an' so I dragged him back an' laid him exactly where he was before an' sorter scattered the sand around—an' then I put for home."

"You didn't seem to mind having people think that another innocent person did it," remarked my grandfather, sternly.

Silas reddened up again at this, and his whole appearance was so pitiable that we should have been sorry for him if he had not shown himself so perfectly remorseless in so long concealing these facts. Cousin Calista and my two younger aunts were curious to know why he had maintained this long silence, and they even expressed their wonder guardedly; but my grandfather explained to them briefly that Silas had for sometime entertained a grudge against the young miners, on account of a wrong which he fancied that one of them had done him. This satisfied them, and he then went on to ask Silas if he had anything more to confess. Silas replied that he had not.

"Then, Silas," said grandfather, in his most terrible manner, as he rose and put out his hand, "I will bid you good night, and I wish you to remember that you are bound over to

keep the peace. Do you understand me? I will only add that there are various legal grounds on which I might institute proceedings against you, and if I am obliged to do that, I shall prosecute you—do you understand?—prosecute you to the full extent of the law."

Silas actually quaked under this threat, which seemed to me, as I heard it uttered in grandfather's deepest voice—used on only a few occasions during my whole life-time with him—impressive enough to frighten a much more valiant man. As he walked off down the road, grandfather looked after him with considerable satisfaction.

"That was a good job done, Square—a good job," chuckled Mr. Dart, "but I'm kinder sorry we let him go. He'd orter be shut up awhile, jest to take the conceit out of him, if nothin' more. I never see a feller with so much nerve—an' him a-knowin' all the while the whole rest o' creation was a-wonderin' an' a-wonderin' how in thunder this thing could 'a' happened—an' layin' it onto them mine fellers."

Mr. Dart had been among those who had been reported to be loudest in his suspicions

of "them mine fellers,"—and Silas's story, which was told in such a way that no one could doubt it, must have made the good man feel rather cheap. As he went out, he added, in a half-apologetic tone, "An' 'twa'n't strange they did. The' didn't seem to be nobody else to lay it onto—an' it seemed like the old man couldn't 'a' done it himself."

"Well—tell everybody you meet," were my grandfather's parting words, spoken more cheerfully than any which we had heard from his lips for many a day. "I'll go over to the store myself," he added. Then he spoke to Mr. Dart in a lower tone. "When people want to know why in time Silas was perched up there in the woods at that hour of the night —it is enough to say that he had considered himself to have been injured and even insulted by one of the young men, and he was meditating vengeance on him." Then he whispered something in the sheriff's ear. "You will oblige me by being very strict in this matter," concluded grandfather, and Mr. Dart went off saying, "You can trust me, Square. That's all right."

He was greatly elated with the thought that he had a sensation in store. Between him and

grandfather, at least twenty persons were informed within the next half-hour of the simple solution of the mystery which had shaken our little town to its foundations, and before they went to bed that night fully nine-tenths of the inhabitants of the village, and even of the outlying districts for several miles around, knew that it was cider-brandy and Jed Sears's old sorrel mare that killed Uncle Ezra Parkins, and that Mr. Holly and Mr. Perrine had had nothing to do with it. Great ridicule and incredulity had been excited by the story that they did not know of the murder until the second day thereafter. This was considered palpably false, and had added considerably to the prejudice against them.

Silas remained on his farm very quietly for weeks after this event. Grandfather had really frightened him enough for that—as he had intended to. Indeed, I do not remember seeing Silas again for a year or more, and he never came to our house after this to borrow books. Eventually he married the daughter of a neighboring farmer, and lived the monotonous and unmarked life of the average dweller among the mountain solitudes, whose greatest excitement is the hunting for a miss-

ing cow, or the shooting of a fox which preys upon his hencoop.

My grandfather at once sent a letter to Mr. Holly and Mr. Perrine, and invited them down to a jubilee dinner during the next week. They came and we had a merry time, clouded only by the absence of Aunt Apphia, who was afflicted again with one of her sudden headaches, which did not seem to attack her until the dinner was well under way and grandmother was sending us all upstairs to dress.

The young men were in the highest spirits. They confessed now that they had not realized how deeply they had felt the trying experiences of the last weeks, until the burden was removed by grandfather's letter. The strange facts in the case were repeated again and again, with all manner of exclamations and witty comments. Grandmother had even to check the young people a little and remind them that they were talking about a horrible tragedy.

"Yes, but we have been under a cloud, and now we have come into the sunshine, you know, Mrs. Wells," Richard Perrine explained apologetically. "You don't understand what we have suffered. Why, we rode through

town to-day without meeting a single glance, so far as I saw, of dislike or suspicion—a thing which we have almost never done before—and it was right down pleasant. Some of the people even smiled and nodded to us, and we smiled and nodded back, I assure you."

Grandfather, who was democratic to his backbone, seemed delighted with this statement.

"Yes, those looks were really almost, if not quite, the hardest thing we have had to bear throughout all of this terrible time," said George Holly.

When we had gathered in the parlor again, he reminded Cousin Calista that David rejoiced on his harp whenever he vanquished his enemies, and asked her if she would not rejoice on hers for awhile, in behalf of her two providentially delivered friends.

After the music there was more talking, and then Cousin Calista cried out, "Oh, why can't we take our supper on the Indian grave to-night? It is going to be a grand sunset—see how clear it is—and you won't mind riding home in the evening," she added coquettishly, turning toward our guests.

They looked at each other doubtfully, but

my grandmother, who had rapidly reviewed, in her mind, the contents of the pantry, brought them to a favorable decision by reinforcing Cousin Calista's invitation most cordially. She retired at once in order to get things ready, and soon Aunt Jerry followed her. Aunt Jerry thought that nobody could make such sandwiches as hers. From time to time she came into the parlor on one errand or another, flushed, excited and very beautiful. Her glowing color, her large, dark, sparkling eyes, with the waves of her blue-black hair sweeping down her round cheeks and covering her little ears, form one of the most charming pictures in the galleries of my memory.

At last she reported that everything was in readiness. The luncheon had been packed in various small receptacles, so that each of us carried one. Shannah bore a hamper, and each of the young men appropriated one also. Then grandfather suddenly announced that he thought he would not go. He had a good deal to do, he said, and he did not seem to be in the least needed. In fact, grandfather was getting rather stout, and the climb up the pasture hill was not so easy for him as it had once been.

All of the family began to expostulate.

"This affair with Silas has taken an enormous amount of my time," explained grandfather. "More than that, it has taken a vast deal of my temper. The thought of that oaf, and all the trouble he has made us, has irritated me almost beyond endurance. I couldn't do my work, it fretted me so much. I have three or four troublesome cases coming on soon now, and if you don't mind, I will stay at home and work on them."

"Oh, but we do mind!" cried Cousin Calista, posing dramatically and shaking her yellow curls. "We really need you."

"Do go, father," added Aunt Jerry. "I made extra sandwiches for you, and there is going to be hot tea."

"I am in no mood for talking," insisted grandfather, though he was visibly weakening.

"There is one subject you can always talk on," suggested grandmother, with a sly twinkle in her eye; "and I am pretty sure that you have never discussed it with these young men. You are neglecting their education in this regard."

Grandfather colored, though he laughed. The young ladies fairly shouted. They knew

perfectly well what grandmother meant. He had come across some book or pamphlet upon the subject of Melchizedek, in which the author, in a long and elaborate argument, proved to his own satisfaction that Melchizedek and Shem were the same person. Grandfather had been greatly impressed with this author's views, and grandmother had laughed at him when he had several times become visibly excited in laying the matter before more or less incredulous visitors. Those of the present generation cannot comprehend how absorbingly interesting questions of this sort were to the New Englanders of sixty and seventy years ago.

"I suppose," said grandfather, as if determined to brave it out, "that you mean that very ingenious theory concerning Shem and Melchizedek. Interesting as that discussion is to you, my dear, I do not propose to afflict our young friends with it."

"I assure you, sir," declared George Holly, "I shall hardly be satisfied now unless you tell me all about it. Indeed," he added more seriously, "we do wish that you could go with us. Dick and I will especially feel it if you

do not go, for we are the ones who are really at the bottom of the whole trouble. Besides," he added, in a lower tone, "it seems enough to be deprived of the company of your eldest daughter, without any further reduction of the party."

After a little more urging, grandfather consented to go, but he stipulated that he should not be hurried in climbing the hill.

"I will myself undertake to see that your wishes are carried out," laughed George Holly. "I will walk beside you. Perhaps Miss Barbara will give me her hand."

I was delighted with this proposition, though there were those in the family who were not. As grandfather was obliged to wait and do a little work at his desk before starting, the others were a long way ahead of us by the time we were crossing the little bridge and turning up the steep and stony road (by this time dwindled to a tiny cowpath) which wound along the brookside; then through grand woods; and, last of all, through the open pasture, up to the beautiful and romantic spot which we called the Indian grave.

As we started off, Mr. Holly dutifully sug-

gested that now was a good time to begin the revelation of the identity of the two famous Scriptural characters who had been mentioned; but grandfather laughed in an annoyed way, and remarked that he should never hear the last of it from his family if he should bore one of his young guests with his favorite topic.

"It is really a most ingenious and satisfactory piece of historical reasoning," he insisted, "but we will not take it up to-day. I should like to be able to say, when they begin to tease me about it, that I have not at all enlightened you regarding the subject. I am sure that you do not mind. I cannot be mistaken in thinking that your very polite request originated in your desire to give me pleasure."

George Holly gravely reiterated his individual and genuine interest in the subject, but grandfather laughed his arguments away, and they fell to talking of politics, the mine, the trees along the way, and other matters of more or less superficial interest. As the ascent became gradually harder and harder, and grandfather puffed and kept stopping to breathe, there were long pauses. Then Mr. Holly sometimes set down the hamper which

he was carrying, but I kept tight hold of his hand.

Once, as we started onward, the young man began in a concerned way, "I am sorry, sir, to see that Miss Apphia is in such a delicate state of health. She seems to have a great deal of headache."

"Does she?" asked grandfather, with as much surprise as grandmother had shown under similar circumstances.

The young man looked at him with a spice of impatience in his manner.

"Is it possible," he exclaimed, "that you have not noticed it? Why, almost every time that we have been here, it seems to me, she has a headache."

"She never used to have headaches," argued grandfather defensively. "We have always considered her uncommonly strong—though she is so slight. These headaches that you speak of are something new. Why," he added suddenly, "they must date back to the runaway. She was dreadfully shaken up then."

"That is just what had occurred to me," agreed George Holly, looking so seriously disturbed that I loved him harder than ever. "I

hope she was not internally injured. Had you not better have her case thoroughly examined by a physician?"

"I think I had," said grandfather, nodding his dear old head in a rather bewildered way. "I can't understand why I haven't noticed this. Apphia is always so bright and merry that I can't associate the thought of illness with her. Dear, dear! I hope it isn't anything very bad."

"It has troubled me for some time now, sir," said George Holly. "I wondered why you were not more worried about it."

I could have told him—what my astute little mind had early detected—that the reason why grandfather had been so blind, was because Aunt Apphia never had these terrible headaches except on the comparatively infrequent occasions when the young men from the mine appeared. Dimly I felt, rather than understood, the reason for this; but, even if I had wished to do it, I could not have explained to any one my vague impression. Poor grandfather had not the remotest inkling of it.

Little more was said, for by this time the exigencies of the ascent taxed the powers of

all three of us, and we plodded along almost in silence until we reached the edge of the hill. Then the whole of the western view burst upon us—a vast expanse of sky, just now rose-colored, with gleams of gold here and there, and grand peaks outlined against it, their sides purple with shadows and streaked with light where the sun broke through at intervals. Between us and them lay the valley, with its shining river winding through it, and the village grouped irregularly beside the beautiful stream. Every house, no matter how mean and shackly it might be, became a snowy little cottage in the distance, and its embowering trees were transformed into poetic groves. George Holly gave an exclamation of delight when he saw it, and we all stood there for a moment to take it in. But the others, who were a hundred feet or more above us, resting placidly upon the beautiful knoll which was our objective point, began to yodel and shout to us to hurry, and we fared onward.

"We are starved," cried Cousin Calista, poutingly, as we approached.

"But we must rest awhile after that climb before eating anything," puffed grandfather,

as he sat cautiously down between her and grandmother. "How did you stand it, my dear Mrs. Wells?"

"She was a wonder, sir," replied Richard Perrine for her. "I must say that she complained less than the young ladies did, and she was hardly willing to stop a moment, no matter how steep the path was."

Grandmother was spare and wiry, and a splendid climber, and she was greatly pleased with the compliment.

"I was certainly most carefully attended," she declared graciously. "Mr. Perrine never left my side for an instant."

"Thank you," said grandfather, deeply touched by the young man's courtesy.

He did not observe the cloud which lowered upon the brow of his pretty niece. Grandmother's statement had been literally true, and the elegant Miss Calista Summers had had to trail along behind her with Aunt Jerry and Aunt Leah and Elihu Trimble, quite, as it were, unhonored and unsung; but the fact caused my naughty little soul no compunctions whatever.

The smell of the wintergreen was in the air while we made a fire for the tea and ate Aunt

Jerry's dainty sandwiches; and a light wind chanted in the birches just above and beyond us.

"It is a beautiful spot," George Holly exclaimed, as we were gathering up the remnants and packing them away to carry home.

"Isn't it!" cried Cousin Calista. "It is the loveliest place I know of."

"But I am not sure that I quite like this rather alarming precipice," he continued. He stood on the brink a moment and looked down on the rough and broken rocks, which extended for several rods at the foot of the cliff, with here and there a bush or tree springing up from between them.

"Oh, that is the best part to me," laughed Cousin Calista. "I hate tame things. I like a tang of danger. It is this wild height which gives the place its character. I am sure the Indians—there used to be lots of Indians in this valley, you know—used to like to come up here—and in my soul I am sure that some great sachem is buried here. I build stories about him whenever I come up."

XVI

A PROBLEM SOLVED

"I know no satisfaction more profound than that we feel in the success of a friend,—in the real success of anybody, for the matter of that."

Lowell's "Letters."

CHAPTER XVI

A Problem Solved

SOON we entered the woods, and the path became dusky and dewy, but Cousin Calista did not seem inclined to hurry. She was getting closer and closer to personal affairs in her talk, and had many serious suggestions to make regarding the mine and its conduct.

"I think it is lovely for you to go into such a business as mining," she said. "How did you happen to do it?"

He explained to her that his father had been the owner of a coal mine in the South. He had been very successful, but he had died when George was a mere boy, and the executor of the estate had thought it best to sell the property.

"But I never could forget that mine," he said. "I always wanted to own a mine, just as my father did, and so I studied at the School of Mines in New York and resolved to devote my life to mining. At that school I met Dick Perrine. We were fast friends during the years

we were together there, and we have been together during the four years since we graduated."

"I think he is fine," languished Cousin Calista. "All of us like him so much! He seems like a jolly, generous boy."

George Holly laughed.

"That is just exactly what he is. But he thinks that I am too dignified and solemn—so it is just as well that I have such a companion as he."

"Oh, I should never think of your being solemn!" simpered Cousin Calista. "You are just right, I think—not too grave and not too jovial."

It seemed to me that this open flattery offended him; but he merely thanked her in a perfunctory way, and then recurred to the mine.

"You were speaking of our venture," he said. "I think I may have mentioned at some time when we have been down at your house, that Dick's father has been trying all sorts of experiments with our ore."

"Oh, yes," assented Cousin Calista sweetly. "But Uncle Wells seemed to think that you never would be able to do much with it."

"Well," began George Holly, in a confidential sort of way, "he may be right, but, all the same, Miss Summers, our experiments are very encouraging lately. You see, I have my small laboratory here, and I do everything with it that I can. Then, when I find that I haven't the apparatus necessary to go further, I write to Mr. Perrine, and he goes right forward. I wouldn't wonder if we should astonish the 'Squire one of these days."

"I'm sure I hope so," sighed Cousin Calista. "Uncle is the dearest man in the world, but Aunt Wells says he doesn't know the first thing about business, so you needn't feel too much discouraged by his opinion."

"Well," laughed George Holly, "you needn't tell him what I have said. It will be best to surprise him."

"Oh, I hope you will have a very great establishment up there before long—hundreds of miners, great boarding-houses and rows of cottages for your helpers—and that you can organize the company in such a way that you can run off to Europe or anywhere else whenever you want to. One of my friends at the school in Boston which we girls attended, was the daughter of a Pennsylvania mine owner,—

and that is the way they do. It will be a very different thing from what it is now."

"It is going to be somewhat different right away from what it is now," declared George Holly with decision.

"How is that?" inquired Cousin Calista, in some alarm. She did not know but he meant that he was going away from Hickory.

"Oh, we think we may build a house there by spring, and then Dick's older sister, who is devoted to him, may come up and keep house for us."

"How delightful!" cried Cousin Calista enthusiastically—too enthusiastically, it seemed to me, as I trudged along in the dusk, clasping the hand of my beloved Mr. Holly. "It will be charming for us to have another friend in Hickory, and I know we shall all like her. I hope she will like us."

"There is no doubt about that," he rejoined; and then, almost before we knew it, we were in the village; and then we were going in through the dear old gate, and the rest were falling upon us to know if we had been lost, and why we had been so slow; and then Cousin Calista put on the most self-conscious and silly air, and hesitated and blushed and stam-

mered out, "Oh, we—were—that is—we were only—talking, you know—and it was so interesting I fancy we never thought how fast the time was passing—did we, Mr. Holly?"

And he looked straight at her, with his great, honest brown eyes, and said in the most commonplace way, "Yes, probably that was it, Miss Summers."

And still Aunt Apphia had her dreadful headache, and could not come down to bid the young men good-by.

The next morning, while I was helping Aunt Apphia in the garden (her headache had quite vanished), Cousin Calista came out with an effusive offer to help, too, and Aunt Apphia set her to gathering and tying up seeds and marking them. We pottered back and forth along the garden path until at last Aunt Apphia, with a lapful of infinitesimal poppy-seeds, invited us to leave everything else and sit down beside her under the big tree and help her tie them up. It was very warm, and we were glad enough to do it.

When we were fairly seated, Cousin Calista began: "It was too bad, Affie, that you couldn't go up on the Indian grave last night. I don't know when I have seen such a sunset,

and the supper tasted awfully good; and the young men were uncommonly nice; and you ought to have gone."

"Yes, I was sorry to lose it," said Aunt Apphia soberly.

"Mr. Holly is so very nice when one really knows him," pursued Cousin Calista.

"Yes?" rejoined Aunt Apphia coolly. "I don't feel as if I knew him well at all."

"No, of course you couldn't," commented Cousin Calista condescendingly. "You have had the headache so much when they have come down, and then the murder and all—why, really, none of us have seen them so very much, for those times when we were so excited about old Uncle Ezra, didn't count. We simply couldn't think or talk of anything then. But last evening it was different. We had the very loveliest talk."

Cousin Calista sighed and blushed and dropped her eyelashes. One might have inferred that she had had a proposal of marriage from Mr. Holly, or, at the very least, a declaration of love.

Aunt Apphia murmured something about being "very glad"—and tied up poppy-seeds as fast as she possibly could.

"Yes," pursued Cousin Calista sentimentally, "there was a good deal that he didn't wish me to mention—his most private affairs he talked about—oh, it was so nice to feel that he had confidence in me, you know, and all that sort of thing! But I am pretty sure that he wouldn't care if I told you that he is thinking of building a house up at the mine, and having Mr. Perrine's sister come on and keep house for them. He is really doing great things up there. I hope he will let me tell you about it pretty soon, for it is just as interesting as it can be; and he thinks he is going to make a good deal out of the mine, after all. That will surprise Uncle Wells, won't it?"

"He would like it, though," said Aunt Apphia. "I am sure I hope the young men will make it all pay."

This conversation threw me into a still fume of indignation. It seemed to me that Cousin Calista was not telling the truth, and yet she said no one special word that I could find fault with. I wanted to confide my irritation to Aunt Apphia, but there was about her through all of this talk a sort of an impervious mantle of dignity. I did not dare, even when we were

alone together, later, to say anything in condemnation of Cousin Calista.

It was perhaps a week after our supper on the Indian grave that the young men came down to make their regulation call. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, and we were all assembled as usual in the east room, arrayed in our prettiest dimities and lawns, with the sewing birds and embroideries and reading aloud in full operation—but none of us were so utterly absorbed in what we were doing that we did not keep glancing furtively out toward the western horizon, and listening for footsteps on the bridge. Every one of us heard the first tap which was made there by the fine white horse and the bay—and then the young men dashed up to the door.

It was plain to see at once that they were again in uncommonly high spirits. Richard Perrine was even more full than usual of his jokes and laughter, and there was a smiling and, in a way, triumphant air about Mr. Holly which quite transformed his serious—almost too serious—expression. But for some moments after their arrival, they did not say anything concerning whatever had happened to elate them. They touched upon the usual

topics only, and Mr. Holly seemed greatly troubled because Aunt Apphia again sent in her excuses. She had started for her room as soon as we had heard them coming. She said that she did not feel equal to seeing anybody. She was "dreadfully tired," and, as she had been helping grandmother about her pickling all the morning, her weariness was a reasonable enough pretext. Mr. Holly was disappointed also because grandfather was out of town.

"We have some important news, we think," he said, with a manner which indicated suppressed excitement. "We are really going to get something worth while out of our fool's gold."

"Are you, indeed?" inquired grandmother, with genuine interest. She was of an eminently practical turn, and had been even more disturbed than the rest of us at the apparent futility of the young men's efforts.

"Yes," he replied, with conviction. "Dick's father and we here have been co-operating in our experiments, and we have clearly demonstrated that there is sufficient sulphur in our ore to pay for mining it, provided that we can separate it at a trifling expense. We have

known for a long time that we had a great deal of sulphur in the ore, and sulphur is so much used, in its various forms, in the arts and manufactures, that I have built great hopes on it, though Dick here has not much encouraged me."

Mr. Perrine laughed, and colored a little.

"But his father has had more confidence in me, and has kept a good chemist busy in following out such experiments as I have suggested, and instituting others of his own, until at last we feel justified in saying that we know we can make a good profit on the mine—by the separation of the sulphur—and we are going almost immediately to very considerably enlarge our facilities, employ more men, build more houses—oh, we are going to have a great establishment—like that which you foretold, Miss Summers. I reckon you will live to be proud of us yet."

Grandmother and the others broke into a torrent of congratulations and questions, and in the midst of them, grandfather arrived and the whole story had to be retold to him. His broad, benevolent face fairly beamed with his delight, and he shook hands with both of the young men again and again.

"This means that you will become permanent citizens of the town of Hickory, does it not?" he asked in conclusion.

"We hope so," replied George Holly, with a face quite as bright.

"That is good," pronounced my grandfather, in his most Websterian manner. "We want such men as you up in this part of the State. It takes a little while for strangers to gain the confidence of a community—but you will soon get it here, very soon—all the sooner, because our people, I feel sure, realize fully that they have done you injustice, and they are at heart eager to set the wrong right. I predict that you will, both of you, be Selectmen of Hickory ere long, then members of the Great and General Court, then possibly Congressmen—and, by and by, it will occur to the powers that be that a Governor ought to be chosen from our part of the State. Oh, I see no limit to the ambitions which may reasonably be awakened in your hearts upon taking up your residence in the proud and happy town of Hickory."

Then there was much more laughter and merriment. When a pause occurred at last, George Holly (the spokesman, as usual), said,

with much seriousness: "It is now time that I should broach to you what is really the main object of this visitation. It must seem natural to you that we should desire to celebrate the good fortune which has befallen us by something rather out of the common. We have therefore decided that you must all of you gather up your forces and collect your defences, and prepare to undertake the fatiguing and dangerous journey, so long contemplated, to the famous Fool's Gold Mine, in the town of Hickory. The proprietors of the said mine, being about to demolish most of the crude and elementary and inadequate structures which have heretofore served to carry on this vast project, wish to show them to you first. Thus you may see exactly how we have been situated in these days of small things. We therefore hope that you may be able to drive up there for a picnic some day soon. How would next Wednesday do?"

"Well," began grandfather, who was evidently still a trifle doubtful about undertaking so long and arduous a pleasure trip, even after Mr. Holly's grandiloquent invitation; "the young people—"

"Oh, but we want you, sir," broke in Richard Perrine.

"Yes, we want you all," added George Holly. "And that is one of the conditions. If any member of the family has a headache or from any other cause is unable to come on the appointed day, the picnic is to be postponed. We want you all—and we especially want Miss Apphia."

"We are going right down to invite Mr. Trimble," remarked Richard Perrine. "And is there anybody else whom you would like to include?"

"Elihu has a college classmate visiting him," suggested Aunt Leah. "And possibly another may come during the week."

"We shall be most happy to invite them both."

It was decided that there was nobody else. The day was convenient, and upon counting up the resources of the two families in the way of horses and vehicles, it was found that the rest of us could drive up comfortably in Elihu's and our carry-alls, if Cousin Calista should ride Lady Jane, as she was more than willing to do.

"And you are not to bring anything to eat," were Richard Perrine's last words as he bade grandmother good-by at the door. "We shall spread the table in a grove near by."

It had also been especially stipulated by the young men that Shannah should accompany the family, for they had seen how much we thought of her and how worthy she was of our affection. She had been called in from the kitchen and solicitously invited in person by Mr. Holly. It is needless to say that Shannah rose grandly to the occasion. She accepted, after a thoughtful moment, in which she appeared to be enumerating to herself her many engagements; and after a dutiful reference to her mistress.

"An' it's kind ye are, gintlemin, to be afther thinkin' of poor Shannah O'Flaherty," she said with quaint courtesy. "It'll be a glad day for me, sure, whin I do be havin' the great picnic, with the young ladies an' all, Mrs. Wells bein' willin', an' I do be thankful for your beneficial invitation."

We had all known that Shannah would not let such an opportunity slip, without bringing forth from her store some very mellifluous word.

When the invitation was later conveyed to Aunt Apphia, she said at once that she hoped it would be a lovely day and that we all must go, but that she really did not feel equal to such a hard trip and would stay at home.

"Oh, but you must go!" I assured her. "Mr. Holly said the picnic would be postponed and postponed until everybody could go. He wants everybody, and he said he *must* have you."

"Oh, no, he didn't say that," she protested with a half-scornful, half-grieved quiver of her lip.

"Yes, he did say just that," I insisted. "And you must go, for I want to go, and I can't have a good time unless you go."

Grandfather was more practical. He called Aunt Apphia one morning into the east room, whither, with me clinging to her, as usual, she obediently resorted.

"How is it about these headaches, Apphia?" he asked severely. "I have been watching for them, since Mr. Holly spoke of them with some alarm; but you have not seemed to have them, queerly enough, except when he was down here. Do you feel as if they were in any way connected with the run-

away? Did you get some hurt then that you are concealing from me?"

The shadow of a smile flitted across Aunt Apphia's face, but she answered, demurely enough, "No, father, I think I have quite recovered from whatever harm I suffered then."

"Then you don't think you had better go over to Dr. Bates, and have him examine you?" suggested grandfather tentatively.

"Mercy, no!" cried Aunt Apphia. "What should have put such an idea into your head, father?"

"Oh,—I have felt worried lest you should have sustained some internal injury,—and these mysterious headaches seemed to bear out that theory."

"They have not been bad,—not bad at all," poor Aunt Apphia assured him.

"I am very glad to hear it. And you think you will be able to undertake the trip to Hickory on Wednesday?"

"I don't want to go,—but of course, if you think I ought to, I will."

"You don't want to go?" Grandfather looked at her with a puzzled expression, not unmixed with real worry.

"No," she repeated, trying to speak lightly,

but not perfectly succeeding. "I am very much interested just now in my work at home here,—and you know I am older than the others,—and these diversions seem more suited to them than to me. But of course I will go, if you think best,—though I must say I shall not look forward to it with any special pleasure."

"Yes,—you had better go," he said decidedly, though his eyes still looked cloudy and troubled behind his big, silver-bowed spectacles.

So it was settled; and when the appointed Wednesday dawned, a fine, breezy August day, full of hints of September, we were all packed into the two carry-alls, while Cousin Calista, in her green habit and long white feathers, rode beside us on her pretty pony. Elihu had two strong horses and his open carry-all had three seats, so that our whole party rode comfortably, and we were all a-quiver with excitement and anticipation.

XVII

A SYLVAN SCENE

"When they do have taste, when they are not color-blind, I tell you men have the best taste going. None of your feminine prettiness and fussiness and clutter and toggery. They set us an example. They are severe and simple and dignified.'

"*Mrs. Bisbee*" *in* "*The Petrie Estate.*"

CHAPTER XVII

A Sylvan Scene

GRANDFATHER had been persuaded to ride with Elihu, and Aunt Apphia drove Tansy. She and grandmother and I occupied the front seat, while Shannah and Aunt Jerry sat behind. Aunt Jerry was in almost hilarious spirits, and, in spite of the fact that Aunt Apphia was inclined to be sober when we first set out, the fine air and Aunt Jerry's contagious glee affected her so that she was soon laughing, just as she had used to before the runaway and the murder and the other events of this strange summer. We had all been quieter than usual, and Aunt Apphia had had even more to subdue her spirits than the rest of us, as I, especially, could understand. In later years I could see that she had had much more than any of us could possibly have imagined.

Shortly after we had turned off into the Witch Brook road, and passed the scene of

the tragedy which had so vitally concerned us all, we saw the young men riding down the hill to meet us. Aunt Jerry and Cousin Calista had begged them to wear their mining clothes—the very ones in which they had first appeared to us beside the brook. But perhaps this had been too great a sacrifice for their vanity, or perhaps they had thought that my grandparents might feel that such array would hardly be respectful; certainly, they were dressed, if not exactly in the same garb, still with as much care, as though they were bound for the Court of St. James.

Their faces were glowing with pleasure as they came nearer and perceived that all of their requests had been complied with. They took off their hats especially to Shannah, and gave her particular greeting.

"Isn't the weather fine!" cried Richard Perrine. "I knew it couldn't rain when we had made so many plans—but George here was skeptical, as usual. He is the worst pessimist, Miss Jerry! You want to labor with him."

"I never thought of such a thing!" declared Cousin Calista, reining up her pretty pony and gazing with her archest expression at George

Holly, who was peering in at our carriage-load, his eyes full of pleasure.

At her words he turned toward her courteously, doffed his hat, and thanked her.

"Dick confounds common sense with pessimism," he explained gaily. "A great many people do that. I simply have common sense —and the clouds last evening did augur possible storms, but now that you are so nearly up to the mine, I shouldn't so much deprecate a storm. We could protect you."

"I hope we shall not have a shower," cried grandmother, who was starched and embellished after the very latest ideas in the "Lady's Book," and could not bear the thought of having her finery wet.

"Oh, you won't get wet, mother," Aunt Aphia assured her, and we drove on up the hill.

The young men informed us that we were to inspect the mine before eating our lunch. In order to do this with the least walking, we took a roundabout course from the Lathers place; returning there again before proceeding up the hill. We found it, or I did, very uninteresting. The big, dark hole in the ground, with a ladder going down into it, and ropes dangling here and there; the creaking of

the derrick; the very dirty hands and faces and clothes of the four or five miners; the rough shanty that they lived in—all of these were rather displeasing than otherwise to my fastidious taste. But my grandfather looked at everything minutely, and asked a thousand questions, which the young men answered with an enthusiasm that surprised me. Cousin Calista was even more demonstrative. She alighted from Lady Jane, having called Mr. Holly to her assistance with an air of pretty proprietorship—and darted here and there, with all manner of exclamations and questions.

"Oh, what is this funny machine?" she would cry, and "What do you do down there?" and "Isn't this fascinating, Leah? Oh, I love it! It must be perfectly bewitching to do this sort of thing!"

All of us got out and looked around very thoroughly for fifteen minutes or more. Then we climbed into our seats again, and plodded onward.

When we came to a point from which we could see the Jed Sears farmhouse perched on its hillside, the young men pointed it out to us, and showed us the windows of their sleep-

ing-rooms, describing the views which they commanded. Grandmother told us that, when she was a little girl, her father had once taken her up there when he went to buy a cow, and that the house was then an old one. It dated back, the young men said, to Revolutionary days—but it would soon be resolved by the hand of Time into its original elements, and they proposed to escape from it before it should tumble down upon their heads. They did not intend to take us up there, but to a grove a half-mile or so further up the hill. So we fared onward.

Presently we turned off into a wood road, and for forty or more rods rode slowly forward under overhanging boughs of lofty, primeval forest trees, until we came to a grassy dell, in which had been set up the prettiest imaginable tent. It had dainty little awnings, scalloped in red. The flaps in front were turned back, and revealed, amid all sorts of woodland decorations, a large table which looked most inviting to our famished eyes. A mossy spring gushed out from a hillside not far away, and this, after all, was the most welcome sight that met my eyes, for I was perishing with thirst. All of us were gathered

soon around the spring. To this day it seems to me that a sweeter draught I never tasted than that which Mr. Holly dipped for me, with a little silver cup, from that bubbling, moss-set chalice.

Jed Sears and his wife bustled about, carrying out what must have been previously given orders. So perfectly had our hosts planned every arrangement that we heard them give scarcely any directions; yet presently we were summoned to take our places around the table, where everything was beautifully arranged. It was patent to us all that the executive ability of much more subtle and sophisticated beings than poor Jed and his wife must have been exercised to reach such a result. Flags were draped over our heads. Rustic seats were provided for everybody. Sprays of wild flowers and berries were laid all over the coarse, but very clean, white tablecloth. Around the dishes were twisted vines and evergreens—and such dishes! They were of plain and common ware for the most part—but their contents were new and wonderful to us all. We partook first of savory roasted chickens and delicate sandwiches, which rivaled even those that Aunt Jerry was ac-

customed to make. Hot tea and coffee were brought in for those who liked them, while iced lemonade flowed in abundance for the rest of us.

The conversation was very gay. Everybody, even to my grandmother, was in extravagant spirits—everybody except Aunt Apphia. She was quieter than I had ever seen her, but all the others were so happy and excited that her mood had no effect upon the general gayety. I saw Mr. Holly several times looking at her with a troubled expression; but he was so busy, and had so many questions to answer, and so much bantering persiflage to meet, that he could not attend very closely to any single guest.

There was only once when any sort of a hush fell upon the company. I have heard my Aunt Apphia remark many times, during the years since then, that it was a little thing; but every one who was there on that eventful day recalled it afterward with bitter sorrow.

There had recently been a wedding in a famous family, and Aunt Jerry had been reading about it in the "Home Journal." She described it with great zest. There had been an open-air festival, and the ceremony had

taken place in the woods, under a great arch of evergreens. It had been like a marriage in some great English household.

"That is the way I mean to be married!" declared Aunt Jerry gaily.

"Yes, but this isn't the man she was engaged to at first," said Aunt Leah. "Don't you remember reading about it? She was engaged to the son of So-and-So, and it seems she is a bold kind of girl—I suppose she thinks that anybody so rich as she is isn't bound by the same rules that other people have to mind—and she went and called on him once—it was some errand or other—and he was very indignant. He said it was a most immodest thing, and the match was broken off. Then she went right away—out of spite, I judge—and married this young fellow—nothing like so nice, they say, as the first one. I don't know why the first one should have been so angry. He couldn't have been much in love with her, I should think. That doesn't seem like such a dreadful thing to me."

"Well, it was pretty bad," remarked Richard Perrine, half laughing, but very much in earnest. "In society in the city a girl could

hardly do anything which would bring more contempt upon her than to go alone to call upon a young man. It would be social suicide."

Suddenly I caught George Holly's expression as he gazed fixedly at his friend, and then I noticed Cousin Calista's face. It had grown perfectly white. The corners of her mouth dropped, and her blue eyes dilated. Richard Perrine came to himself, as it were, with a jerk. He stopped speaking, and then followed an instant of disagreeable silence. It was broken by the voice of George Holly saying, in his easiest way, "I want you to be sure, Mrs. Wells, to taste these Chinese nuts. Try one, I beg of you; then don't eat any more unless you like it. But we are very fond of them."

Then the gayety began again, and it continued afterward without pause.

The substantial features of the meal were familiar to us, but after they had been disposed of, we were offered the strange confections and conserves which ornamented the table from end to end—most remarkable jellies and fruits and candies and nuts—and all

of them so good that grandmother at last took me under her wing, and declared that Aunt Apphia, who had been very indulgent to me, would let me fall ill. In fact, when the luncheon was over and we scattered to stroll about the beautiful woods, I began to have throbbing pains in my temples, and Aunt Apphia sat down with me under a great tree and held my head, while grandmother dosed me with soda and water. She was a believer in the universal merits of soda, and never went off for the day without carrying a little bottle of it in the silk bag which was an essential part of her excursion outfit.

We were sitting quite out of sight of the pretty little pavilion in which we had taken our lunch, though it was really only a few rods away. Mr. Holly had spread a blanket on the ground for us, and grandmother was just saying how comfortable she was, when Mr. Perrine came rushing up to tell us that the others were about starting for the witch's house.

"You will all want to go," he urged. "It is really the sight of the region. It is said to be a hundred years old, but everything around this poor little log cabin is just as the witch

left it when she died, and that was before Jed Sears was born."

"Oh, I have heard of that house ever since I can remember," said grandmother with considerable interest, "but Mr. Holly has fixed us up so comfortably here that I do not feel much like stirring. How far away is it?"

"It isn't far," the young man went on persuasively, "and we mean to walk slowly. Miss Jerry and I are going to botanize on the way, and you shall stop all you like to rest; but, really, it would be too bad for you to go away without seeing our great show."

"Well," assented grandmother, yielding gracefully to his importunities, and quite overcome by the subtle flattery conveyed in his anxiety to secure her company; "we had better go. Come, Apphia."

I began to cry.

"I can't go, grandma!" I wailed. "My head aches so and I am so dizzy that I can't walk."

"I don't feel quite right myself," added Aunt Apphia, kissing my hot forehead. "I can come up again almost any time, so don't consider me for a moment. You go on with Mr. Perrine, mother, and I will stay here and

look after this poor little girl. As I am the one who let her eat all that stuff, I am the one who ought to take care of her."

After some expostulation on the part of Mr. Perrine, Aunt Apphia carried her point, and, to my great relief, she and I were left alone in peace and comfort under the shady tree. She stroked my burning head, and soon I began to feel better. Not a sound was to be heard except the subdued rattle of the dishes, which was far enough away to be only a pleasant murmur in my ears; and occasionally we could catch a bit of the somewhat high-pitched conversation which Jed Sears and his wife were carrying on with Shannah, who had insisted on helping them in the clearing away of the table, as she had equally insisted upon sharing the luncheon with them, instead of with us. Shannah had strong old-country ideas regarding station and privilege.

Soothed by all of these favorable conditions, I was fast falling asleep, when I felt a sudden shock run through Aunt Apphia's frame. She controlled this in an instant, but it was followed by a violent trembling which she was powerless to stop. I opened my eyes and saw that the cause of her trepidation was a figure

which was running rapidly toward us. It was that of Mr. George Holly. He was carrying his hat in his hand and was almost breathless from his haste.

XVIII

AN ANNOUNCEMENT

"He had a most persuasive behavior."

Izaak Walton of Sir Henry Wotton

"Sometimes mortals find the portals
Of the fairy-land;
And they straightway, through the gateway,
Enter, hand in hand."

From "Concerning Isabel Carnaby."

CHAPTER XVIII

An Announcement

AS he neared us, he slackened his speed. Aunt Apphia had felt me stirring uneasily. Now she leaned down and whispered in my ear, "Go to sleep, Barbara. It is only Mr. Holly. It frightened me at first —for I was nearly asleep, too. Go right to sleep, darling."

I curled up again and obediently shut my eyes—but I did not go to sleep, not I, and I have since told Aunt Apphia that I did not, but that was years afterward, and she only laughed.

"I seem to have thwarted your designs for once," he cried in a suppressed voice, as he threw himself down beside us.

"What is it?" she murmured, pretending not to notice what he had said. "Is anything the matter? Has—has—anything gone wrong?"

"Yes," he replied in a low voice, but hotly. "Something has gone very wrong. Why do you avoid me? What have I done? Is it be-

cause you dislike me so much, that you never appear when we go down to the village?"

Aunt Apphia buried her face in her hands and said nothing—but I could feel her still trembling like a leaf.

"Well," he said bitterly, "I can't help it. I have done everything I could think of to make you like me. I did not mean to say anything about it to-day—indeed, I didn't see how I was going to get any chance; but since it has happened so, I am going to tell you that, ever since that day by the brook down here, I have loved you, and it is a love that has only grown with every time that I have seen you. I thought at first that you might come to love me in return—but lately I can see that you have changed. It has cost me many sleepless nights and much wretchedness, but I suppose that is nothing to you. I understand that you have had troops of lovers—and probably you are used to a recital of their woes—so I will not bore you any more with mine. Only, I wish you would tell me what I have done to make you treat me so? There must have been something. What have I done?"

His tone was so fiercely insistent that she was obliged to answer him, but all that she

could do was to murmur through her closed hands.

"Nothing—oh, you have done nothing at all to displease me."

Then a tear dropped on my face. It had oozed out between her fingers. She was crying—and my little heart began to beat more furiously than ever. I longed to comfort her, but I did not dare to stir, and still I lay there, miserably feigning to be asleep.

"Then, if I have done nothing," he went on, still angry, but gradually getting back his usual manner of immovable dignity, "tell me why you treat me so."

Aunt Apphia now began to sob, and he saw that she could not speak to him if she would. Her agitation broke down the last bulwark of his caution. He threw his arm around her with a single impulsive movement. As I was lying on the ground on the other side of her, with my head in her lap, this would have dislodged me from my position if I had been a less determined sleeper.

"Don't, Apphia! Don't sob so, darling!" he whispered in her ear. "I didn't mean to speak to-day—I know I am not wise to do it; it would serve me right if you should not listen

to me—but I love you so, Apphia! I have loved you ever since I first saw you. You must have seen it. I didn't try to conceal it. I was going to speak with your father about it, but I couldn't before we had made a fairly certain success with the mine—don't you see? I thought he considered me a feather-headed visionary—or worse—but now I feel as if I might ask him for you as soon as a good chance offers. I can't see you suffer so, for I love you with all my heart, and I don't care who knows it."

And all this while my weeping Aunt Apphia, who was probably the most perfectly proper maiden that ever lived, was lying with her head on Mr. Holly's shoulder without making the slightest effort to get away. This fact appeared to impart courage to her lover's heart, though she was still unable to utter a coherent word.

"I shall have to say as they do in stories, Apphia," he remarked presently. "I can't stand it very long without knowing how you feel. If you love me, please press my hand."

She began to laugh, though rather hysterically. Then she straightened herself and lifted her hands to arrange her hair. I could see

through my half-open eyes that her face was flushed and that, in spite of her tears, she was smiling.

"I am sure this is not according to etiquette," she whispered archly. "It is not proper to invite people to your house and then declare love to them."

But he saw that, for whatever reason she had avoided him in the past, it was not because she did not love him, and then he kissed her,—in what seemed to me a most foolish and unnecessary manner,—at least a hundred times.

Presently the sound of voices was heard in the distance—not those of the servitors in the tent, but of the gay visitors to the witch's house. Aunt Apphia pushed George Holly away, and began again to twist her disordered ringlets and arrange anew her tortoise-shell combs. This was well, for they were much awry.

"And we must be married at once, Apphia," he insisted hurriedly, "just as soon as possible—just as soon as I can get a house built to put you in—and I am going to tell them all —tell them right away, and ask your father for you before them all."

"Oh, not to-day—not now!" she begged.

"Why not? Don't you think your father will like it? Oh, I am sure he will not hold out against us. I can give him letters, you know, from people in Boston and the South"——

"I am sure he will not object," she whispered. "He has always liked you. But the others! Oh, it doesn't seem as if you had better."

"They are just the family—my family now as much as yours," he urged. "It seems to me we couldn't have a better time—it would be the crowning touch to this perfect day. Why not?"

"It doesn't seem like you," she whispered feebly. "You are always so calm and self-contained. It seems to me that this is too showy and dramatic—almost silly."

"Not at all," he affirmed, decidedly. "I would tell the whole world if I could. I am so proud of you and so happy that nothing else is in my mind but you—and my own happiness. I have been through so much—all this uncertainty—and then your not seeing me. Why, Apphia, I have suffered torture, and

now the revulsion has come and you must let me have my way."

As the party came nearer and nearer, Aunt Apphia roused me, pretending to be covered with compassion for breaking into my deep and impenetrable slumbers. My headache was by this time quite forgotten, and I was palpitating with the delight of the situation. My dear Aunt Apphia and my hero, Mr. Holly, were at last brought together—a consummation which I had lately quite despaired of. And, of course, I had to walk close beside her as Mr. Holly, still carrying his hat in his left hand, drew her forward to meet the oncoming procession.

"Oh, I am afraid! I am afraid!" she whispered, in almost a wail, and she began to draw backward.

"Afraid of what?" he asked. "What are you afraid of, Apphia?"

She could not have told him; but years afterward she confided to me that, in a vague yet real way, she was afraid of just what happened later—a terrible nightmare of memory, which to this day sometimes makes me shriek and start up in my sleep. But she did not

answer him, and he still drew her forward, with me dragging along behind her.

My grandfather walked in advance, with Cousin Calista, whose self-satisfied face did not wear at all its usual expression. She looked sober and even saturnine, though my grandfather was talking earnestly, as though telling her a story. Behind him trooped irregularly the rest of the party. With the exception of a college-mate of Elihu's, who seemed just now to be devoting himself to grandmother, the party consisted entirely of our own family. Grandfather started nervously when he looked up and perceived George Holly leading Aunt Apphia forward. She had regained her composure by this time, and held her head erect, with a shy pride which was very beautiful, though her eyes were still somewhat discolored with her tears.

"Please stop, Mr. Wells," he said in a joyous tone, which was in itself enough to reveal the news. "I have a favor to ask of you—and I am so sure you will grant it that I want you all to stop and hear me."

He lifted his hand and laughed aloud as he spoke. Richard Perrine was as inveterate a laugher as my Aunt Jerry herself, but it was

seldom that his friend was ever heard to laugh aloud, though his smile was one of the most charming that I ever saw. This laugh, therefore, arrested the attention of the whole company. They all stopped short in the midst of their talk and grouped themselves in eager, expectant silence around George Holly and Aunt Apphia, standing hand-in-hand, like a pair of rural sweethearts at a country fair.

"It is only this, sir," continued George Holly, still laughing. His handsome face was lifted up, and the light wind blew a stray lock across his fine forehead. I have lived over that scene a thousand times.

"It is only this," he said. "Apphia has promised to marry me, as soon as you will let her. Will you set the seal of your approval upon us? I know I don't deserve it, but I want it just the same—and we hope that you will have no objection."

"Is it possible!" exclaimed my grandfather, pulling out his great red silk handkerchief and beginning to mop his bald forehead. "Is it possible!" he repeated in a dazed way.

"I shall insist upon supplying you with references to various well-known people in Boston and elsewhere," continued George

Holly, still in the same laughing strain, "regarding my ability to support her, and my character generally. I feel a fair degree of confidence that they will prove satisfactory."

"So this was why you saved her life!" said grandfather, with a twinkle in his eye. "Well, as you intimate, I don't know very much about you, but I like what I do know, and until I hear more to your disadvantage than I now expect to, I shall enter no opposition to your scheme. Take her, my dear boy. If she will only make you as good a wife as her mother has made me, you will be very happy with her. Apphia, my precious girl, God bless you!" His hands were trembling with happy emotion as he laid them on her beautiful auburn hair. Then he kissed her on both her cheeks, and stood aside to let the others have their way.

Then such kissing, such embracing, such handshaking! And Cousin Calista was one of the most violently demonstrative of all, kissing Aunt Apphia a dozen times, at least, and laughing more loudly and talking more rapidly than anybody else.

Later, I heard George Holly conversing confidentially with grandmother. I was close by him, leaning on Aunt Apphia's knees. We

were waiting for the carriages. The gale of congratulations had died down, and Aunt Apphia, with her arm around me, was sitting at the base of a great willow tree, with her head against its trunk. Her eyes were closed, and though there was a happy smile on her lips, her face was deathly pale. She has told me since that the horror of some impending disaster hung over her at that very moment, though she had no prevision of the real nature of what was to come.

"You see, Mrs. Wells," George Holly was saying, with a loose-flowing tongue, very strange to hear in him, "you see, I have had a terrible summer. We were greatly delighted to find you all, and I loved Apphia from the moment I saw her, and I hoped that soon—not for a while, of course, but after I had had time to show her something of my heart—she would be ready to love me. But she suddenly developed those dreadful headaches of hers, and would not give me so much as a glimpse of her, and then I was sure that she had taken a dislike to me, and I cast about for the reason, but I could not find it. I had endeavored to be just as agreeable to her as I could, and if I had not succeeded up to that

time, how could I ever hope to later? But she says she had a reason for avoiding me, which she will sometime tell me, so I am waiting patiently for that. Then there was the tragedy down here, and the long mystery; oh, I have sometimes felt as though there wasn't much to live for. Then I would think of her, —the only woman that I ever wanted to marry, Mrs. Wells,—and I would resolve that I would not give her up without a struggle. Well, I hope never to have another such a season."

Grandmother laughed, and gave him some of the excellent advice which she always kept abundantly in store, and soon we were all packed again into our carriages and rattling down the long hills and beside the fascinating river to our homes. For my part, I felt as though I were in a dream, as we sped along those golden ways, never so beautiful before. It seemed as though we had been living a fairy-tale, and as though when we reached home and put on our workaday garments again, we should find it all to be the baseless fabric of a vision.

Cousin Calista had insisted upon riding close beside us all the way, for which I was

sorry; why, I could not have told, unless it was because of the old, constant antipathy to her which I had always felt.

I need not have feared that she would say unkind things, or reckless and shocking things, as she sometimes did, not being blest with that gift of innate refinement which was the dower of every one of my beautiful young aunts. She scarcely spoke through all the dreamy, pictured ride, until we entered the village street. Then her demeanor changed. She began to talk as fast as she could, and it was all about Mr. Holly and Aunt Apphia.

"To think, Affie!" she chirped in her most enthusiastic tones. "You will be Mrs. Holly soon! I'm sure it is delightful—very. I wonder now if 'Cousin George' can afford to have a town house for you, as well as this house that he is going to build in Hickory. It will be awfully stupid if you have to spend your winters buried in the snow up there in Hickory."

"I am not worrying about it," said Aunt Apphia, with a bright smile. Cousin Calista could never tease her again. I felt that, with relief all through my being; and with it came a pity for that poor, spoilt cousin, who was so

much accustomed to having every desire gratified that she was simply dumbfounded "when Fate said 'no' to some 'yes' in her." As I looked into her face now, it seemed prettier to me than I had ever seen it before. All of the flamboyant, simpering self-satisfaction was gone out of it. It had an almost elevated look, and I gazed at her with a surprised admiration which must have shown in my expression, for she drew close beside the carriage and turned my little face up to hers and kissed me.

"Well, I'm sure, it is very lovely," she repeated in a mechanical way. "I don't see why we shouldn't all get some mighty good times out of it. I'm going right to work to plan my dress for the wedding."

And so she prattled on until we drove up to the door, and she alighted, shaking her yellow curls over cheeks as white as her picnic dress, and with her eyes seeming to shoot out greenish flames. I had never seen her look so, and my heart quaked with a vague fear of her, which makes my eyes dim as, after all these years, I call it up again.

XIX

SORROW AND JOY ALTERNATE

"I've waked and slept through many nights and days
Since then—but still that day will catch my breath
Like a nightmare. There are fatal days indeed
In which the fibrous years have taken root
So deeply, that they quiver to their tops
Whene'er you stir the dust of such a day."

Mrs. Browning.

CHAPTER XIX

Sorrow and Joy Alternate

THAT night was a warm one, and not very restful for any of us, in spite of our happiness. As we gathered around the breakfast-table in the morning, grandmother remarked, with an apologetic laugh at her own banality, that we all looked as though we had been to a picnic.

In fact, I not only looked so, but I had a distinct pain in my head, and so had Cousin Calista. After prayers were over, she threw herself down on the sofa in the east room, and tossed there uneasily for a half-hour or more, while I reposed in Aunt Apphia's lap by the east window.

At last, Cousin Calista sprang up, looking very wretched, and declared that she was stifling for fresh air.

"Go down and sit on Sucker Rock," advised Aunt Apphia.

"It is hot down there," grumbled Cousin Calista. "It is hot all over the meadow. If

one of you would go with me, I would climb the hill. It must be deliciously cool up in the woods."

"I oughtn't to go," mused Aunt Apphia. "I have more to do than I can possibly manage."

"Then you may have company during the day sometime," suggested Cousin Calista meaningly.

Aunt Apphia blushed.

"Come, Jerry," urged Cousin Calista.

Aunt Jerry was prompt and explicit in her refusal. She, too, had more to do than she could well accomplish. Aunt Leah was off blackberrying somewhere with Elihu. The whole Trimble family had gone together, and, as grandmother sometimes remarked sadly, Leah was getting to be more a Trimble than a Wells.

I looked at Cousin Calista, and I felt sorry for her. It also occurred to me that my own head would feel better in the pasture than anywhere else. I sat up in Aunt Apphia's lap and gazed solemnly into Cousin Calista's unhappy face.

"I will go with you,—if I will do," I ventured amiably.

"Bless its dear little heart!" she cried enthusiastically. "Of course, you will 'do.' We will have a lovely time. I will take my book,—and you will play with all the pretties up there, I suppose."

Just as we were ready to start, grandmother turned Cousin Calista's face toward the light and looked searchingly into it.

"You don't look a bit well, Calista," she complained, in a troubled voice. "You look as our little Georgie did when he came down with the chills and fever. I wonder how your pulse is."

She counted it.

"It isn't too fast," she mused. "Are you chilly, Calista?"

"No, Aunt Wells."

"You don't look right." Grandmother shook her head ominously. "Hadn't you better go over and see Dr. Bates?"

"I don't think so," said Cousin Calista lightly. "I think I shall feel better after I have had a taste of that sweet air up on the hill under those evergreens."

Her very words sounded refreshing, and I was glad that I had said I would go.

We took our hats, and were soon climbing

the pasture-hill, in the shade of the great oaks and beeches which bordered the cow-path.

Occasionally we stopped to rest, and I noticed, child though I was, that Cousin Calista's face did not grow red as it usually did when she climbed. There was something queer about her whole expression. I did not wonder that grandmother was worried about her and thought she was going to be sick. Still, some instinct told me not to mention my apprehensions, and as Cousin Calista evidently did not feel like talking and I had nothing else to say, we were pretty quiet. Once, when she threw herself flat on the ground after we had had a particularly hard pull, I asked her if she were going to faint away; to which she replied with considerable asperity that she decidedly was not. She left the fainting, she said, to Aunt Apphia. She knew exactly how and when to do it in the most artistic manner.

This offended me, though I did not quite understand it—but I was in no mood to be angry with Cousin Calista just then.

When we finally reached the grove, we liked it quite as much as we had thought we should. It was so pleasant that we sat there contentedly for more than an hour. I ranged about

somewhat, picking partridge-berries and running pine, which seemed to be all the treasures growing there at that time of the year.

At last Cousin Calista sprang up from her book—I remember that it was "Shirley"—and said, "Come on, Barbara. It isn't far to the Indian grave. Let's go up there."

I liked that idea very well. Just behind the knoll were fine great rocks, among which I loved to play at house-keeping with acorn cups and saucers. While Cousin Calista lounged under the trees by the knoll, I would go up and play on the rocks.

We toiled along through the "yellow violet hollow," then through the grove where we picked walnuts every November, and then up a bare hillside into the cluster of birches and oaks which stood just behind the Indian grave. The valley lay bathed in light and beauty under the full glow of the summer day. No smudge of smoke, no noise of rushing trains, disturbed its clear air or marred its repose. In the distance we could hear men shouting to their oxen. The tinkle of a cow-bell sounded from some far-off hill-side. Our own cows needed no bells. They came if we but stood at the pasture bars and called, "Co'boss, co'-

boss." We could see them grazing below us, not far from what we called "the west bars." I peered over the awful ledge of the rock in order to find the white cow, which did not seem to be with the others.

"Take care!" cried Cousin Calista sharply. "You will fall over there if you don't take care. Why, don't you know that, if you should fall over there, it would break every bone in your body?"

"I'm not going to fall over," I replied, indignantly.

"Well—go play with your teacups," she said shortly. "You make me nervous hanging around this dangerous place. It is safer up there. Now go along."

I did not like the way in which she spoke to me, but I was in an obedient mood, so I climbed up a little rise, then turned an angle which hid Cousin Calista from my sight, though I could still hear her if she should speak to me in a moderately loud tone—and there I was, among the enchanted rocks which I loved so well, and which I valued all the more because I did not often have a chance to visit them.

For a half-hour or so I played in perfect

delight, singing to myself as I played. Then it occurred to me that I was getting a bit lonesome, and I ran down to the angle and peeped around it. There sat Cousin Calista, in the shade of a great birch, apparently entirely wrapped up in her reading. I ran back again to my cups and saucers.

"It will be getting time for dinner soon," I reflected. "She will call me presently to go home, and I had better play as hard as I can."

I was busily engaged in picking up more cups and saucers, when I heard a sudden shriek—a wild and blood-curdling sound—as of one in the extremity of mortal woe. I dropped to the ground when it struck upon my ears exactly as if I had been hit with a bludgeon. It seemed as though I could not rise—but I knew that I must go and see what had happened. The cry did not sound like Cousin Calista—I had never heard her make a noise anything like it—but who else could have uttered it? In any case, something terrible must have happened. With a wrench, I picked myself up and ran down to the angle and peered around it, hoping that I might see again Cousin Calista's blue gingham gown

and pretty blue hat, with its stylish "bridle" hanging down in front. The hat had been lying on the knoll when I had last looked toward it, and there it still remained—but the blue gown, whither had it fled?

Almost suffocating with terror, I crept up to the edge of the precipice and peeped timidly over it. Then, I, too, gave one long, agonized wail, for I could see plainly, far, far below me, and huddled into a motionless heap, something soft and girlish and beautiful, with a gleam of blue color about it—and I knew that it was our poor Cousin Calista. She had said that it would break every bone in my body if I should fall over the cliff, but, oh, perhaps she might have fallen in some easy way—perhaps it had not killed her!

With trembling limbs I skirted the edge of the rocks and clambered down to the very foot. Then I picked my way up and down, through the briers, and over a fallen tree, until I had come quite to that awful little heap of blue, which I found, when I crept near it, to be all stained and bespattered with blood.

"Cousin Calista! Cousin Calista!" I cried, sobbing in fright and bewilderment and al-

most beside myself with the terror of my loneliness. "Wake up! Wake up!"

She did not move. I remembered how the young men had dashed water over Aunt Aphia and me when we were fainting. There was a spring not far away—fortunately the hillside was dotted with springs—and I hurried to it and filled my little hat with water, though I knew I should spoil the hat, and I wondered whether I really ought to do it or not. Then I hurried back and threw the water all over Cousin Calista's scratched and blood-stained face.

Still she made no motion, and now, full of despair, I flew down the hillside as if I had wings, telling my frightful news to everybody whom I met on my way. They were all old neighbors, and I knew they would be friends in this terrible crisis. Then I burst into the east room at home with the cry, "Come quick; Come quick! She fell over the cliff—right over the rock! She is killed! She is killed!"

Then I knew nothing more for many minutes.

When I came to myself, with a numb, unconscious terror hanging over me, there was

nobody else left in the house but grandmother and Aunt Apphia. The others had all gone up to the fatal hillside; and soon men came along the walk, bearing on a litter of hemlock boughs all that remained of our poor cousin. The doctor said that she must have died instantly after striking the rocks.

Over and over and over I told my simple little story; and over and over they asked me, "Did she seem faint when you saw her last, Barbara?" "Do you think she tried to reach something?" "Do you think she could have fallen asleep too near the edge?" And all I could do was just to answer miserably, "Oh, I don't know! I don't know! All that I know is just what I have told you."

And nobody will ever know.

It was found that Cousin Calista had left a will. Grandfather had not drawn it, but Cousin Calista had told him that she had had a lawyer in Boston prepare her will the very last time she had been there. It was found easily among her papers, and it touched us all, for it was addressed to "My Dear Uncle and Aunt Wells, and all of you whom I love so much." The will was very short. In case of her marriage, half of her property was to go

at once to her husband and children, if there were any; and the other half was to be used by grandfather and grandmother during their lives, and then to revert to her own family. In case she did not marry, grandfather and grandmother were to have the use of it all so long as they should live, and at their death, she wished it to go to her dear Cousin Leah Wells. All of her clothes were bequeathed to Aunt Leah also. Aunt Jerry received no bequest whatever, but Aunt Apphia was to have Lady Jane. I felt as though that were a very small return for the way in which my precious auntie had been treated by Cousin Calista—but nobody could cherish resentment against that poor cousin now. All of her follies and her faults were forgotten, and we thought only of her merry ways, her kindness to grandmother and grandfather, and her unvarying goodness to Aunt Leah.

There was a double wedding in the orchard the next May, on the anniversary of the runaway, when Aunt Apphia married Mr. Holly, and Aunt Jerry married Richard Perrine. My aunts had wished to wait until at least a year should have lapsed after the terrible catastrophe with which

the summer had closed; but the young men had finished their houses, and they needed so much the help of their wives in furnishing and carrying them on, that grandfather and grandmother took sides with Mr. Holly and Mr. Perrine, and Aunt Apphia and Aunt Jerry yielded. Aunt Leah would not be married until the following year.

In spite of the gloom which still hung over us, that double wedding was a joyous occasion; and many long and shadowless years, as I now remember them, succeeded to that tumultuous summer, of which this is the brief and imperfect history.

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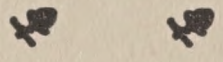

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